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HAJIME KANZAKA
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25周年
あんそろじー
ファンタジア文庫

Slayers 25th Aniversery Anthology

By Various Writers

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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Only one of these stories is from Kazana, and only that one should if anything probably be considered canon, but they are fun stories anyways, especially the Phibrizzo one.
I have done minimal proof reading on this release, because it is non canon.

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Cover Illustration: Rui Araizumi

The Demon of Zephilia

I wondered what the people of the south thought of Zephilia. It sat right against the Katart Mountains and was home to many researchers of the Mazoku (monster race). To put it simply, the Mazoku were the end of the world. They existed solely to bring about the apocalypse. Because of that, some people called this place the boundary line of the world's end. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps it was the very first place where everything would vanish—like water spiraling down a drain after the plug was pulled. Even so, people lived here normally, and there were even those who spoke of hope. They spoke of the miracle of a "Demon Slayer" being born.

But I didn't believe in that. There was no such thing. I was old enough to understand reality. I was ten. The world called that a child, but I had also been told it was almost too late to start aiming to be a sorcerer. About half a year ago, I knocked on the gates of the Sorcerers' Guild and was allowed to transfer into the school. Many of the other students had been receiving elite education since they were even younger. Or rather, it was more accurate to say that everyone except me was like that.

Ah, I forgot. Everyone except me and one other person.

"Good morning!"

With that single shout of hers, the air in the classroom froze instantly. *Clatter, clatter, clatter*—everyone stood up from their seats at once, bracing themselves so they could flee at any moment. Some of the more faint-hearted girls even started crying right then and there. I didn't mind. I did nothing and simply watched the classroom entrance. Because of this, some classmates mistakenly thought I was brave. They were wrong. I had just given up more easily than the rest of them.

In this land of the end, Zephilia, I had long since accepted the nightmare. Nothing could be prevented. Not her appearing in the classroom, not her coming to sit in the seat next to me after a cheerful greeting, and not the likelihood that she would bring some form of chaos and destruction today as well. It was exactly the same as how the Mazoku couldn't be stopped on the coming day of ruin. Human happiness existed only

to be destroyed.

Lina Inverse transferred into this class a little after I did. Within mere days, she had made everyone realize that order was powerless against true evil. She couldn't help but disturb the peace. She scattered despair, using the wailing and lamentations of innocent people as her finest nourishment. I thought only the Mazoku were such beings, but I had been naive.

To look at her, she was just a girl. A petite girl with chestnut hair. She didn't dress conspicuously, but her voice had a strange presence. A child of terror, a king of cruelty—this was my imagination, but I was almost certain she swallowed live snakes whole starting from the head—

Whack! She hit me over the head with a rolled-up textbook. Lina "The Demon" Inverse looked at me with half-closed eyes.

"You're thinking something rude, aren't you? I can tell by your aura."

"No, not at all."

I said it firmly and looked back at her.

"Weren't you expelled yesterday?"

"I was not. It was their fault anyway."

"...Was it?"

I tried to remember. Even among the things she had done during her not-so-long enrollment, yesterday's "Water Tower Collapse / Primary Lab Total Loss / Equipment Storage Room Submergence Incident" was a high-severity event. The reason the water tower at the top of the school fell was that a group of volunteers, who had called her to the roof to finally defeat her, botched their spells and blew up the support pillars. I see. Those people, who acted like a vigilante group and carelessly used spells they had just learned, certainly deserved punishment. In fact, they were strictly reprimanded and placed under suspension.

However, there was a brief window of time between the pillar breaking and the tower falling. While those people were panicking and trying to stop the destruction, she was the one who took advantage of the opening and kicked them all off the roof. Even if they were apprentices, she—who supposedly knew nothing of sorcery—kicked around

five boys who were fledgling sorcerers. I could only say her luck was terrifyingly bad.

There was also her natural aptitude, which was demonic in its own right. It wasn't just that her reflexes were good. She didn't hesitate. She stepped boldly into places where a normal person would hesitate or give up. And (I watched my classmates, who were shivering and clutching their desks, moving as far away from Lina's and my seats as possible), she had the sheer nerve to walk calmly into a classroom where she was feared to this extent. It was truly frightening. I had almost no doubt she squeezed hamsters to death—

Whack!

She hit my head again.

"You're thinking something rude again."

"Like I said, not at all."

I shook my head. She seemed to be remembering the same thing, as she sat down and spoke idly about yesterday.

"Even so, things got out of hand because those guys are so incompetent... What was it? 'I'll show you the difference between us and a dropout'? They should learn to hit what they're aiming at. It's not fair for them to break stuff and then have it blamed on me."

"If a Vibration Blast had hit your head, would that have been 'fair'?"

Even those idiots probably didn't intend to blow up their classmate... The fact that they had mastered such high-level spells at this age was because they were scholarship students whose talent was recognized (despite being idiots). They were certainly arrogant, so there weren't many students who blamed Lina "The Inhuman" Inverse for that specific incident.

Regardless, Lina "The Heartless" Inverse ignored my jab and continued. She scratched her head, appearing somewhat genuinely troubled.

"If I get kicked out of here, I won't have a single school left to go to. If that happens, it'll be home tutoring with my sister... That... I want to avoid that..."

"You have an elder sister?"

"I do."

"Is she like you?"

"I wonder."

"When she kills people, does she do it slowly, starting from the tips of their limbs?"

"That's your second question?"

Lina "The Evil" Inverse gave me another flat look, and then, after a few seconds:

"...I think she does it slowly."

She answered. Since the answer was convincing, I brought the conversation back.

"Can you become a sorcerer through home study?"

"Huh?"

She looked completely caught off guard, so I repeated myself, feeling suspicious.

"No experimental environment, no library, no tools or facilities. If you try using unfamiliar spells in your yard, the neighbors won't stay quiet. The guards are strict about sorcery regulations. Besides, you'd be sitting on a bizarre thorn-throne-like thing, drinking something red out of a skull cup."

"I don't really get that last part... but it's not like that. I'm not going to be a sorcerer anyway."

"What?"

I was the one left dumbfounded this time. I hadn't considered that. Lina "The Cruel" Inverse stated it as if it were obvious.

"Didn't I tell you? I'm only here because I have nowhere else to go. I'm not suited to be a sorcerer anyway."

"Well, you definitely aren't."

"Why?"

Even though she said it herself, Lina "The Unreasonable" Inverse glared at me for agreeing. I interlaced my fingers in a complex pattern, pointed them at her, and

answered.

"You're restless and too quick to pick a fight. With a temperament like that, you might beat some punks, but you won't beat something truly strong. And facing that truly powerful 'something'... that is the reason for a sorcerer's existence."

"....."

Lina "The Scoundrel" Inverse seemed deep in thought for a moment. But then, with a look on her face as if to say 'anyway', she asked.

"Okay, first of all. What's with that hand gesture?"

"Oh, since you looked this way, I made a DIY anti-evil pose so I wouldn't be contaminated by your aura of ruin."

"DIY?! No, more importantly, the aura—ugh, why does asking a question just lead to more things to nitpick!"

As she approached, I took a monkey statue shedding tears of blood (handmade) out of my bag and lined it up on the desk. She became even more flustered.

"What is it this time?!"

"An 'It-Would-Be-Nice-If-This-Was-An-Anti-Evil-God-Barrier' statue."

"Evil god! 'Would be nice'! Just stop it! Let me focus on one thing to nitpick at a time!"

"Father, Mother... the creature is approaching... its talons are scraping... if you read this note, please give up on me..."

"Don't write that!"

She snatched away my scribbled note (my "last will and testament") and yelled.

"Anyway, you just started as an apprentice yourself!"

"Yeah. But I'm suited for it."

"Based on what?!"

"How should I put it... My soul isn't rotten..."

"What does that mean! For the record, you're pretty rotten yourself!"

After causing a scene, she caught her breath. Lina "The Demon General" Inverse seemed to have forgotten what she was shouting about; she shook her head dizzily and went back to her seat. However, being the sharp and (I assumed) insidiously observant person she was, she quickly remembered the topic. She spoke to me out of the corner of her eye.

"Besides, sorcerers are useless. Most of them just get punched while they're chanting slow spells. Astral Vine? Who even remembers those settings?"

"Well, it's not like there's a contradiction in the description just because they stopped mentioning it every time... but if you asked the author, I'd bet they'd say 'Oh, I didn't know that'."

"...What are you talking about?"

"To be honest, I'm not really sure."

It wasn't just me, but occasionally things I didn't quite understand would come out of my mouth. I hoped she would accept that. Though I didn't know who I was saying that to. She looked like she still had more to say, but the teacher entered the classroom, and that was the end of it.

So, that was it. In this land of doom, Zephilia, I spent my school life like this with my blatantly "dropout" classmate.
The lectures we ten-year-old apprentice sorcerers received were mostly boring foundational theory.

Practical application was rare. Learning actual usable spells was reserved for those in very special positions—scholarship students, or those with sorcerer relatives who could give them private lessons.

Even though they were called lectures, a sleepy-eyed middle-aged sorcerer simply repeated the contents of similar textbooks endlessly. What are Chaos Words? What is Magic? What is the World? What are Spirits? And, what are the Mazoku... That went on for years and years.

It was often said that if you didn't start young, you wouldn't achieve greatness—and this was part of the reason. The knowledge one had to internalize as a prerequisite was vast and varied. Rote memorization was meaningless. You couldn't fake whether you truly understood it or not, and cheating didn't work. It manifested in a clearly

visible form. As Sorcery.

No matter how much you insisted you understood the repeated lectures, if you were told to "show us," that was the end of it.

If you couldn't understand, you couldn't move on to practice. If you didn't move to the next stage as young as possible, to put it bluntly, you had no prospects. A life as a magician, an acrobat, or just a person who practiced tongue twisters awaited you.

To the next stage as quickly as possible. Everyone in the classroom listened to the sleepy lectures with deadly seriousness. It was said that occasionally, a student would appear who showed talent even at this foundational stage and could assemble simple spells. Though, these days, such talented individuals usually had a different starting line due to gifted education outside of school.

Staaaring vaaa-cantly.

Except for Lina, who propped her chin on her hand and gazed boredly at the ceiling.

Her classroom attitude was the absolute bottom of the barrel. I thought she was just sulking because she couldn't keep up... but it felt unnatural since she was usually so quick-witted, so my question was answered earlier. She simply had no interest in sorcery to begin with.

I was different. I listened seriously. And because I listened seriously, I was bored.

I stifled a yawn, hiding behind the shadow of my textbook. Our classroom teacher, the sorcerer Istaren, was a man of such talent that he possessed the perfect intonation and pitch to induce drowsiness unlike any other in these foundational theory lectures. He was truly said to be the best of his generation. No, apparently people really said that. The title the Sorcerers' Association gave him was "Istaren of the Slumber."

He looked frumpy in his deep navy robe and mantle, but his face was thin and his actual age supposedly wasn't that high. He just tended to be mistaken for an old man. It was because of his half-closed eyes, his complexion, and his ash-white hair. He read the usual material in a slow... hoarse voice that was just barely audible.

"In other words, a sorcerer... cannot create power themselves... they are one who knows how to rely on magic... that magic... connects to the source of existence... the chaos of nothingness and being..."

Thump. Somewhere in a distant seat, someone must have dropped their forehead

onto their desk. I didn't know who. I didn't have the leeway to look. If my focus wavered, I would be in danger too.

"Aaaah, enough! Nooooo! I can't take it anymore!"

Suddenly, a female student stood up with a wailing cry.

"My heart... my heart is dying... time isn't moving... I gnawed my nails to endure it... all my fingers are bloody now... and yet! And yet we've only moved five lines! Show me... show me the passage of timeeee!"

She scratched her face with her bloodied fingertips and bolted out of the classroom.

The lecture was interrupted, and everyone looked at each other's faces for a while.

I stole a glance at Lina, but she remained looking up at the ceiling, completely unbothered.

A small sigh escaped. It was Mr. Istaren.

"Finally, a student has gone to seek the passage of time..."

"Shouldn't we go stop her before she starts emitting the 'Light of Human Will' or something?"

To my suggestion, the teacher answered vaguely.

"Well, she's harmless. Is my class... really that sleepy...?"

He seemed somewhat concerned, looking toward the hallway with a hurt gaze.

Since no one else seemed willing to say it, I answered.

"It's sleepy."

"...Eh. You're that certain...?"

"I know it's useless to say it, but I believe this will be for someone's sake."

"In such a cool way? Um... is everyone else sleepy too...?"

Once asked, everyone finally started speaking up.

"It's sleepy."

"Yes. It's sleepy."

"I have dreams where I hear your voice even after I fall asleep, and I get so sleepy in the dream that I'm at a loss. It's fine as long as I can wake up, but I feel like one day I won't be able to wake up forever, so I've started consulting a doctor lately..."

Facing these rather serious opinions, the teacher made a pained face.

After listening to everything in silence, he opened his mouth.

"...What about you, Lina?"

The buzzing classroom went dead quiet.

Everyone had noticed that Lina alone had been silent. It wasn't that she was sulking or being aloof; she just wasn't participating. Usually, she would be the first to complain about something.

"Hmm..."

Scratching her nose, Lina muttered while thinking about something.

"I mean, you're doing it on purpose, right? To measure our concentration."

"....."

"Thinking that, it would be frustrating to look sleepy."

"Oh, that's far too cynical a view..."

As the teacher shook his head with a troubled face, Lina turned just one eye toward him.

"It's something I heard, but apparently this follows a traditional sorcerer training method."

"Well... some might call it stuck in the old ways."

"It would be faster to teach spells that work immediately or simple tricks. 'Those who only swallow without chewing gain no nourishment,' was it? They say a 'knowledge-idiot' doesn't know how to innovate, so they never surpass their

predecessors."

Because she suddenly started speaking so fluently, most of the class was bewildered and lost in the smoke.

She finished her talk with a casual wave of her hand.

"Even so, if you just wanted to raise decent sorcerers quickly, that would be better. But the purpose of this school is different, right?"

"That... is true... We want you all to become truly powerful sorcerers."

With a gentle smile, the teacher looked around the classroom.

It felt like a nice moment, and a sense of relief began to settle... but because I was watching Lina's profile, I knew she wasn't done yet.

"But the level of person who can become a 'truly powerful sorcerer' with that method is one in ten or a hundred years. That's why the teachers can run a side business of recommending the 'decent course' to their favorite students or the sons of rich families."

Silence.

Everyone was utterly speechless.

Even the teacher's smile twitched as he managed to squeeze out a reply.

"That's a rather twisted interpretation..."

"But it's the truth, isn't it?"

"I won't deny that one could see it that way."

"Most people who are sorcerers now took that course, didn't they? How about you, Teacher?"

Seriously.

"Knock it off," I whispered. This was going too far.

But Lina was now staring straight at the teacher. As if measuring something.

The teacher averted his eyes sadly.

"You're being far too mean, Lina."

"...I guess so. It's none of my business anyway."

And then, suddenly.

CRACK! A booming sound like someone hitting a wall echoed, and we all froze.

The teacher gasped and stepped back. Looking closely, only Lina remained still in the same posture.

Nothing had actually happened. There was just a sound.

This was...

There was no room for doubt. Lina Inverse, without even using a spell, had finally manifested her anger and malice into physical form. Such terrifying, wicked willpower. For her, who was no longer even human, others were nothing more than prey. I'm sure she probably eats sea cucumbers raw—

Whack! I was hit on the head from the side.

Looking over, Lina was staring at me with half-closed eyes.

"You're thinking something rude every chance you get, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I was just thinking that since sea cucumbers can be poisonous, one should listen to experts."

"What are you even talking about! Move aside. It sounds like something happened outside."

Lina stood up, pushed me out of the way, and peered out.

The teacher and other students gathered at the window too. It seemed I was the only one who thought the noise was Lina's demonic fusion; once pointed out, the sound had indeed come from outside. Though, compared to the threat level of Lina, I didn't think that was a big deal.

I followed her and looked out as well. We looked down at the school garden from the second-floor window. What immediately caught my eye was near the school gate: the

guard who usually stood there (since the school held valuables and children of noble families) was collapsed and twitching.

The one who did it was a sorcerer in a black robe. I couldn't see his face well, but judging by his stout build, he looked like a middle-aged man. He had a child with him—one I recognized.

"That brat..."

I heard Lina groan. It was one of the guys who got suspended yesterday.

The light of lightning was still clinging to the sorcerer's arm. That must have been the art he used to knock out the guard. The power of a great spirit... a Lightning spell.

Seeing actual sorcery used to strike someone down sent a different kind of tension through the classroom. A heavy atmosphere mixed with—inevitably—longing. A powerful sorcerer could easily defeat even an armed guard.

"Move away from the window."

It was the teacher's voice, quiet and chilling. He moved the students back, but everyone's eyes remained fixed outside.

"You stay here."

He left the classroom.

Sensing him leaving through the hallway by his footsteps and presence...

Lina immediately whispered.

"Alright. Let's go."

"Where to?" I asked, though it was a stupid question.

Lina looked at me like it was obvious.

"To see what's happening."

"He told us to stay here."

"But you're curious, right? No matter how you look at it, they came here to take out a grudge."

She walked out into the hallway and started running.

"Wait up!"

I found myself chasing after her.

Lina looked back while running.

"What? You don't have to follow me."

"Well, I agree with that. But even if you're a wicked beast of violence, the opponent is on a different level from yesterday. He's a real sorcerer."

"...I told you to keep it to one retort!"

"Eh?"

As I voiced my confusion, she turned forward again and accelerated.

"What 'real sorcerer' are you talking about with a guy like that?"

I could tell she feared nothing.

I was floored by that and lost my next words. I followed her in silence. We went down the stairs and peeked out from the entrance.

Mr. Istaren had just stepped out, so we snuck behind him and hid in the garden bushes.

The sorcerer who had broken through the school gate was slowly walking through the garden toward the building. Mr. Istaren stood a little in front of him, waiting. No one seemed to notice us.

Teachers other than Mr. Istaren had come out of the school too. Three more were standing and talking. They seemed to be blaming Mr. Istaren.

"That boy is Geald... he's in your class."

"That's why I told you. Suspension was too heavy. A warning would have been enough."

Mr. Istaren didn't even look at his colleagues who were chiming in; he just muttered quietly, barely audible to us.

"...The punishment was appropriate. You should know that as well."

"But...!"

"What you're worried about is that Geald is the son of 'Macbeth of the Dark Clouds,' isn't it?"

That voice seemed to reach not just us, but the sorcerer—that Macbeth guy?

"Yes. You should have worried about it much more, Istaren... It's been a long time since we spoke. I thought you had learned your place after I showed you the difference, without us even needing to talk."

He threw back his hood to reveal his face.

With a dangerous light in his sunken eyes, Macbeth grabbed the head of Geald, who was hiding behind him. He might have intended it as a stroke, but like his grim face, his touch couldn't hide his resentment.

"I doubted my ears when I heard from my son. Protecting a problem child's crime and punishing the victimized son? I had doubts about your leadership, but I didn't think you'd make such a basic error in judgment."

While the other teachers backed away, Mr. Istaren remained there, dull and sleepy-eyed as his name suggested.

"Do you see that, Macbeth?"

He pointed to the roof of the school building.

Even from below, one could see the traces of emergency repairs on the broken roof.

"Geald and his classmates destroyed it with a spell. Geald is the only one who could use an attack spell strong enough to collapse a water tower; there is no doubt about who used it. Everyone's testimony matches."

"If we're talking about testimony, I heard you ignored what everyone said in unison."

Macbeth stepped forward, menacingly.

"That some brat who snuck in due to poor conduct goaded our Geald and made him chant a spell he didn't want to use. I heard everyone present said exactly that."

"....."

When the teacher fell silent, Macbeth swung his arm. Lightning crackled.

The light hit Mr. Istaren's feet. It wasn't powerful enough to be an attack spell—just a remnant of the previous one.

Macbeth's next roar was more violent than the lightning.

"And yet you denied it! Claiming Geald lied! Without even any proof! Who do you think you are!"

"The proof is—"

Mr. Istaren swallowed his words.

He shook his head slightly and answered differently.

"No, I simply judged objectively..."

"Most likely, you're just jealous of a talented child like Geald and have made him your target. Geald will eventually join the ranks of the Sorcerers' Association leadership. Just like me. A position people like you can never reach. In other words—"

"That may be true, but—"

Macbeth was enraged by the teacher's interruption.

"Do not interrupt me!"

He raised both hands and unleashed Chaos Words—clear, complex words of power!

A globe of light flew and struck the school roof. Right where the emergency repairs had been made. An explosion blew away not just the patch-up boards, but most of the roof that had been intact.

This time it was a Fireball. It was a flame that symbolized the power of a sorcerer, wielded by a truly capable one. Even crouching in the bushes, it felt like being struck by the blast wave above the roof. That was the extent of the power.

I had followed Lina out on a whim... but I immediately felt regret. I said it myself, but I hadn't truly understood. This was on a completely different scale from our daily

lives. That Macbeth, even if he was a stupid doting father, was a real sorcerer.

Because I shivered, I bumped into Lina next to me. I looked over, curious about what face she was making—and found an unexpected expression.

Lina wasn't afraid or surprised; she was frowning, deep in thought. She muttered to herself.

"...It's strange."

"What is?"

"Now that he mentions it. Why did that sleepy old guy believe what I said?"

"Is that what you're worried about?"

Feeling lost, I started speaking rapidly.

"Well, obviously Geald's story was absurd. That you goaded him."

"My story was absurd too. That I fought five people and beat them down. Normally people wouldn't believe it. Unless they saw it happen..."

"Maybe, but... you don't have to think about that right now, do you?"

As the blast and heat wave passed and silence finally returned, I could hear the panic inside the school building. It was a huge commotion. Since seeing such powerful spells was likely a first for most students, it was natural.

I realized it then.

It wasn't just that sorcerers had power that was scary. It was the fact that a sorcerer *could* use the power they obtained... that was the scariest thing of all.

The other teachers were startled and had fallen on their backsides. Only Mr. Istaren held his ground, though he looked tentative.

"Um... excuse me. I didn't mean to interrupt your talk..."

"Really. You really should be careful. Isn't that right?"

Pointing his finger, Macbeth sharpened his voice even more.

As for Geald, whether he was acting arrogant alongside him—honestly, he looked like

he was pulling back. But he was also captivated by seeing the power shown. It was the same as us just a moment ago.

"Macbeth."

At the very edge of things becoming uncontrollable.

Mr. Istaren tried to restrain the sorcerer.

"Please just calm down... at least don't do anything irreversible."

"You have already done something irreversible. You put a stain on Geald's record. And for the sake of a worthless dropout, no less."

"It wasn't a punishment that would stay on record..."

"Do you think I care about your internal reports, you idiot! Even if there were such a thing, I would correct it on my own authority. I cannot leave behind a memory of having been talked back to, even once, by people like you. Not for someone who is meant to stand at the top!"

"Then—"

That voice made me shiver to my core.

I snapped my head to the right. Lina wasn't in the bushes. Before I knew it, she had stepped out and called out to Macbeth.

With a sloppy attitude, hands thrust in her pockets. As I said before, her voice had an extraordinary presence. No matter the commotion, no one could ignore it.

"Wouldn't it be better to first wipe out the memory of how you lost miserably to me?"

"Who are you...?"

As Macbeth glared with cold eyes, Geald whispered.

"It's Lina Inverse...!"

It sounded more like a warning than tattle-telling. Geald looked completely terrified and was backing away.

"Is it you? A worthless piece of trash who framed Geald—"

"Lina!"

Mr. Istaren shouted in a voice that had cracked.

"You! Interrupting again—"

Macbeth started to yell again, but—

His sleepy eyes transformed, and Mr. Istaren shouted back.

"Shut up! Um... Lina. What are you doing? You shouldn't be here... you absolutely must not do anything dangerous. Never."

He reached out his hands fretfully, but Lina didn't give him a single glance.

"What are you gonna do? Or, since you went through the trouble of coming to school, want to get an education? It seems like you especially need it."

She smiled defiantly. I could only see her back. But I knew exactly how she was smiling.

"This brat—"

Macbeth's swelling voice was interrupted once more.

Without waiting for him to finish, Lina took her hand out of her pocket and threw what she was holding. Sand. A blind.

However, Macbeth easily jumped to avoid it. He gave a mocking laugh.

"Hahaha! A children's fight? As if I'd be beaten by such a—"

But, but.

Even if Macbeth avoided it, Geald did not. Macbeth had jumped away, leaving him behind.

Lina lunged at the abandoned Geald. She delivered a kick to his face, then twisted Geald's arm behind his back as he fell, pinning him down.

"You!"

To the shouting Macbeth, Lina returned a nasty grin.

"What?"

No matter how unreasonable a stupid parent or powerful a sorcerer he was. He wouldn't blow up the place along with his own child.

But...

I stepped out of the bushes too. I raised my voice.

"Lina! You're taking him too lightly!"

Sorcerers weren't as useless as Lina thought. It wasn't just about throwing lightning and fireballs.

Lina heard me, but she wouldn't let Geald go. In the meantime, Macbeth had started chanting a spell. I didn't really understand it.

"Sleep!"

Geald, who had been struggling under her, suddenly went limp. He fell unconscious and started snoring just like that.

Lina too. She tumbled to the ground. Lowering the arm she had been thrusting up...

Thrusting up?

I felt a strange sense about her final posture. What had Lina been doing? While pinning Geald, she had been pointing her hand at Macbeth.

At the same time Lina fell, Macbeth collapsed too. He was also asleep.

"...........?"

I couldn't understand what had happened at all. It was as if the spell had been reflected back at Macbeth, and he had fallen asleep himself.

As I stood there stunned, I heard Mr. Istaren mutter in a tone of disbelief.

"She performed a round."

"Eh?"

"Betting that he wouldn't chant a difficult spell if she took the child hostage... she repeated the sleeping spell Macbeth chanted, exactly as she heard it. Certainly, for a

spell of this level, just saying the words has an effect... but what guts."

Looking at Lina, Mr. Istaren was trembling with awe, more so than he had for the violent sorcerer.

Completely excited—forgetting even his title of 'Slumber'—the teacher looked around for someone to talk to, saw that his colleagues were still paralyzed with fear, and finally found me and started speaking.

"Truly, how terrifying! Who could do that? A girl who doesn't even know a fragment of Chaos yet, using nothing but concentration and reflexes... That's right. She is the one...!"

He caught sight of my expression and suddenly came to his senses.

"Ah. Um... no, sorry. Anyway, the situation is settled. We'll handle this Macbeth here, so could you take Lina back to the classroom?"

He cleared his throat and said that.

"Yes..."

There was no reason to refuse. I picked Lina up and tried to carry her from the entrance.

She wasn't heavy, but carrying a completely unconscious person is a chore. While I was struggling to open the door, I faintly heard the teachers whispering around Macbeth. They intended to keep their voices low, but Mr. Istaren's excitement hadn't faded, and everyone's tone was rising along with his.

"So, Istaren... are you really going to take such a prophecy seriously? That she is a child of destiny who will bring calamity even to the Mazoku?"

"Yes. Today, I am certain."

"That's a heretical thought. Calamity for the Mazoku is a contradiction in the first place. Interpretations vary."

"Even so, this is hope... the only one..."

While talking, the teachers' eyes turned toward us.

Or rather, they likely looked at Lina. To make sure they didn't realize I was listening, I

hurried into the entrance.

To the still-sleeping Lina.

I whispered.

"I don't really get it, but it seems you're destined to be hated even by demons. Well, maybe some good will come of it. Probably."

And that's how it went—

I've been telling Mr. Kanzaka for the past few years, "Why don't you try writing about this period?"

But he didn't seem like he was going to write it at all, so I just went ahead and did it myself.

By the way, the setting and everything are mostly my own nonsense, so I'm sorry...

The Demon of Zephilia: End

Marianne’s Skin

He walked as if dragging a heavy boulder behind him. Rather than simply walking, Zelgadis Graywords was climbing, step by step, through the trackless wilds of the steep mountains. The slope was so sharp that a single lapse in concentration would send him tumbling down. Not that he was so fragile that such a fall would finish him, however.

It was quiet. Zelgadis was, by nature, a taciturn man. With no companions and no conversation, the mountains were enveloped in a profound silence. There were no sounds of insects, nor the cries of birds or beasts. It was as if everything had died out. Only the sound of his own breath and the occasional crunch of dry leaves and withered branches beneath his feet echoed through the air.

He clicked his tongue. Normally, whether on a mountain path or anywhere else, he was capable of moving in total silence. The footwork of a swordsman who had tempered himself to the absolute limit was naturally that of a hunter superior even to a cat. And yet...

"Haa—"

Exhaling a breath that looked bleached by the low temperature, Zelgadis pulled up his cloak. Numerous cracks ran across his skin—which looked as though it were encrusted with scale-like rock—and blood was seeping through. It had been a long time since he had seen the color of his own blood.

It’s a lighter wound than I thought. Not much bleeding.

If that was the case, then the splashing sound he had been hearing since earlier was coming from the wicker fishing basket hanging from his neck. It had been bothering him incessantly. He was currently a fugitive; he was nervous that even the sound of his own breathing might alert his pursuers, yet this splashing...

"There’s still one alive in there."

Perhaps a lively fish was jumping inside the basket. For someone as suspicious-looking as Zelgadis, obtaining food at shops was difficult. If someone were to catch a glimpse of his true face, which he usually hid under a hood, it would cause an uproar.

Therefore, he plucked nuts, hunted wild rabbits, and caught fish to eat.

Was the fish he intended for tonight’s dinner stubbornly shouting, "Let me out of here"? Even though it had been shaken considerably, he was impressed by its tenacity.

"Even a fish struggles to live. If so, then I..."

Muttering to himself, he decided it was a pity but he ought to finish it off, and he opened the lid of the basket. If it splashed too much, the fishy water would get on his cloak. He didn't want to be haunted by an unpleasant smell until he finally cleared these mountains.

Zelgadis loved cleanliness and refinement. He loathed things that were ugly, smelly, dirty, or unpleasant.

"...Hm?"

He pried open the lid with some effort and peered inside, knitting his brows. The fish, which had been thrashing about until a moment ago, suddenly stopped moving and peeked its face out from the water’s surface. Dark fish eyes—the kind that made one feel uneasy just looking at them—stared straight back at him.

Eyes met eyes. After a brief silence—

"Me..."

The fish flapped its mouth open and shut, uttering human speech. Simultaneously, from the position where the fish's pectoral fins should be, a pair of what looked like human arms suddenly sprouted out.

"Me, Nunsa..."

Zelgadis grabbed it without a word and threw it away with all his might.

"Honestly, to pull someone up without permission and then..."

The fish(?) who called himself Nunsa spoke in a low bass voice that sounded like it would give a person nightmares.

"To suddenly hurl me away without listening to a word... you’re like a demon of a man, aren't you?"

"I get that a lot," Zelgadis replied curtly. He stared intently at Nunsa, who had

audaciously perched himself on Zelgadis's shoulder, sitting cross-legged and puffing away on something that looked exactly like a cigarette.

What is this creature?

He knew that a race called Fishmen existed. They were said to possess high intelligence equal to or greater than humans, as well as abundant magical power. However, because they primarily lived underwater, their interaction with humans was shallow and they were rarely researched. They were mysterious, miraculous beings.

Why had such a thing been caught on a fishing line he had dropped into a random mountain stream? And why was it involving itself with him?

"What is it...?" Nunsa rolled his dark eyes and twisted his lips. "I don't have a hobby of being pleased by a male's gaze, but I suppose it can't be helped—" He boasted, claiming he was reputed to be exceptionally handsome among Fishmen. "If it's just a kiss, I wouldn't mind..."

Zelgadis gave in to his instincts, lunged at Nunsa, and threw him away at full throttle. *There are things a human must prioritize above all else, no matter the cost. I, too, am a human,* Zelgadis thought—even now, after having been synthesized with an evil spirit and a rock golem.

The flying Nunsa performed a graceful mid-air somersault, ignored the laws of physics to pull a U-turn, and came back. Flying at the speed of a bullet, he once again strutted onto Zelgadis's shoulder.

Magic—Levitation? No, judging by the speed, it's Shofuku (Raywing). Or perhaps it's a magic or skill unique to Fishmen that humanity does not yet know.

"Don't make me waste my magical power needlessly..."

That's my line. Don't make me waste my physical strength, you fish. Why are you flying? It's creepy, Zelgadis thought, but he didn't say it out loud. He was, by nature, a taciturn man. Besides, saying unnecessary things and repeating the same exchange would only tire him out. He had no energy to spare right now; he had bled too much. Greasy sweat was starting to bead on his skin.

They say misfortunes come in bunches, but even he, who had lived a harsh life, felt as though his heart might break.

"Am I cursed?"

When he muttered this, Nunsa asked with a blank, vacant expression that made it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

"Are you talking about... your skin?"

"I'm talking about you!" he wanted to shout, but he didn't want to engage in any more conversation with this fish. He responded concisely, as usual.

"I heard there is a town that specializes in White Magic, pharmacology, and specifically research related to the skin."

He spoke of the purpose of his journey.

"I was heading there, but I was attacked by an unidentified monster. It looked like an earthen doll covered in something like white rock... It had abnormal hardness. It even put cracks in my skin, which blades cannot pierce."

This region was largely undeveloped and had many monsters, but there shouldn't have been anything particularly dangerous. Considering the distribution of monsters, nothing that Zelgadis couldn't handle should have been living there.

What was that thing? It had a shape he had never seen before. He wondered if it was a pure demon with a unique appearance, but it didn't seem to possess intelligence. Furthermore, it had a raw vividness and presence unique to animals. It was different from a spiritual being that merely took flesh—a pure demon. It had the scent of a creature that had lived in this world as a being with meat and blood.

A new species? Or perhaps an experimental earthen doll made by some mage for fun had escaped and gone berserk? Well, whatever. I likely won't encounter it again, Zelgadis decided, stopping his train of thought. More importantly...

"Why are you sticking to me?" The strange creature still sitting on his shoulder was bothering him.

"We're going in the same direction. Besides, as you can see, I am weakened..."

How am I supposed to tell the physical condition of a Fishman by looking? Zelgadis thought, but—well, you know.

"We both... need rest..."

Using Zelgadis's head as a backrest with casual familiarity, Nunsa laughed eerily. "I know of a place where we can rest. I shall guide you there..."

The Fishman made a gesture like tilting his chin, and Zelgadis, as urged, looked in that direction. After continuing the climb, they were almost at the summit. Beyond the twisted trees that filled his vision almost without gap, there seemed to be an open space. Between the trees, he could see leveled ground and what looked like a field.

And a seasoned building.

A human house, on a mountain like this?

He wondered, but he was confident that he would no longer be surprised by anything he saw. His exhaustion and the sleepiness from blood loss had reached their limit; Zelgadis headed toward it, whether he liked it or not.

Little did he know what he would encounter at the summit.

The setting sun was staining everything the color of blood. It was a flat stretch of land on the mountaintop. The earth was covered in a smooth, white material, as if fine, specialized sand had been hardened with water. Raw soil, exposed where it had been carved out in squares, was tilled and used as fields for cultivating vegetables and wheat.

It was a strange landscape. It looked like a fabricated toy. In the back of that space, which existed inexplicably at the summit, stood a charming house made of bricks. Thick white smoke rose from the chimney, as if someone were cooking or boiling water.

"You've picked up another animal..."

On the shoulder of the stunned Zelgadis, Nunsa gave a wry smile. It was only when it was pointed out that Zelgadis noticed the countless animals, centered particularly around the house in the back. Cats. Dogs. Horses. Donkeys. Pigs. Sheep... They were all livestock. It was like a ranch.

Despite that, every animal was free-roaming, some napping lazily, others chasing each other. It looked like a paradise for animals, not at all like strictly managed livestock. There were no humans. There seemed to be no monsters, either.

Zelgadis slowly moved his hand away from Nunsa—whom he had intended to hurl at

that white earthen doll-like thing should it appear. Nunsa looked puzzled for a moment, then let out an incredibly loud shout.

"Ooooohoy, Millianne—!"

Zelgadis winced at the noise. Just as he opened his mouth to complain, the door of the brick house in the distance creaked open, and someone peeked their face out.

It was a woman.

Because she was far away and it was getting dark with the sun setting, the details were unclear. She looked like a young woman in tidy clothing. Even from a distance, he could tell she had a graceful physique and a small, well-proportioned head. Somehow, she looked fabricated. She was doll-like.

The woman, apparently named Millianne, approached while troubledly coaxing a large dog that was clinging to her apron. Zelgadis started and instinctively tried to hide his face with his hood. He was bad with women. When they saw his true face, they screamed.

"Mr. Nunsa," Millianne called out, making a gesture as if she were hiding her own face in the same way. "...Is that person a guest?"

She walked slowly, very slowly, until she reached a position where she could finally be seen clearly.

Millianne was wrapped in bandages from head to toe—her arms, her legs, her neck—everywhere that should have been exposed skin was covered, even her face.

Contrary to its charming exterior, the interior was chaotic. It wasn't that it was dirty or messy from a lack of cleaning, but rather that there were far too many things for the size of the room. Roots of some kind of tree. Reptiles that had been charred black. Bottles filled with strangely colored liquids. Animal bones arranged by type. An amount of insect carcasses so large you'd think they were used for making accessories...

Not only on the worktables set up around the room, but also on the walls, miscellaneous things were pasted everywhere. Dried meat and smoked leaves hung from the ceiling, leaving almost no space to move, let alone a place to step.

This is the inside of that woman's—Millianne's—brain.

Pushing aside root vegetables with strange, face-like hollows, he was guided to a table that was relatively organized. A cat was curled up on a chair; he hesitated, wondering if it was okay to push it off and sit down.

"I'm sorry for the mess."

The woman wrapped in bandages, Millianne, picked up the cat with an embarrassed air. She set it gently on the floor and stood before the hearth where a pot was hanging. Holding a ladle and cooking chopsticks, she began to simmer something over the fire.

"Normally, this isn't a state where I can invite guests in, but—"

"White Magic?"

Zelgadis didn't particularly care. He spoke shortly, taking care not to blow away the particle-like gems piled up like powdered medicine in front of him with his breath.

White Magic was a magic system different from the Shamanistic Magic that Zelgadis specialized in. It was mainly the specialty of priests in temples, focused on healing, dispelling curses, and detoxification. It could be misused, but unlike flashy attack magic, it could be called a medical technology that stayed close to general life. It was supposed to be a type of magic strictly managed by temples and not widely circulated among the common people.

Apparently, this woman named Millianne was researching it on her own. Judging by the half-written parchments bundled here and there, he had come to that conclusion and asked. Perhaps she hadn't heard him, for Millianne stirred the pot with a nonchalant face and then walked over to him.

"Shall I tend to your wounds?"

She knelt and peered gently at Zelgadis's abdomen. At his skin, which still had cracks and was bleeding.

"That won't be necessary. It will heal if I sleep."

"Putting on a brave face..."

The one who muttered was Nunsa, who had become part of the scenery. He (it’s hard to tell a Fishman’s gender, but he’s probably a 'he') was gracefully doing the breaststroke inside a water tank placed on a shelf. It was unnatural for a fish's way of

swimming, but there was no use thinking about this creature.

"Treatment is unnecessary, but I might have died by the roadside if I had stayed as I was." Zelgadis offered his thanks for the time being. "I am grateful. It’s rude of me, but please let me rest for a while. I won't cause you any trouble; I'll leave as soon as my wounds are healed."

"Trouble... there's no such thing—" Millianne stroked his abdomen regretfully once, then returned to the pot. She brought over a basket containing bread and a stew made of simmered chicken and vegetables. "May I at least offer you a meal?"

"I would appreciate it."

Come to think of it, he hadn't eaten yet today. His stomach growled. After turning slightly red, he reached for the food lined up in front of him and then suddenly looked at Millianne.

"I often pick up animals, but this is my first time taking care of a human. If I’ve been impolite—"

She was devotedly brewing tea for a stranger—for Zelgadis. "...Does looking at me make you lose your appetite?"

"Is it okay to eat?"

After getting permission from Millianne, who had stepped back a bit troubledly, Zelgadis ate ravenously. In a life of travel, you won't survive unless you eat when you can. It was very delicious.

He enjoyed the taste for a while, completely absorbed. Once he felt more like himself, he felt the pain in his abdomen anew. Perhaps because he rarely got wounded, he wasn't very used to pain. It was a nostalgic yet heart-wearing sensation.

"You looked like a person of dignity, but your way of eating is quite childish, isn't it?"

Millianne watched him with amusement, then opened a window, perhaps for ventilation. "Or are you not as old as I think you are?"

"What about you—"

How old are you? Do you live alone? Why on a mountaintop like this? There were many things he wanted to ask, but before that, his eyes were stolen by the view

beyond the window. It was the summit; the view was excellent.

It was a distant view, but he could see a town at the foot of the mountain. It was a magnificent townscape. What kind of material was it? Buildings made of a smooth material—the same as the white earth he had seen surrounding the fields at this summit—were lined up evenly. It was a pure white town that looked like it was made of sugar candy.

Zelgadis loved beauty. "It’s beautiful," he muttered involuntarily. Millianne moved away from the window as if escaping. As if moving away from beautiful things. As if to prevent her bandage-covered body from being seen clearly in the light.

"It doesn't look like that when you see it from up close. It’s the same as me, and the same as women."

That’s true for men, too. It’s true for humans. This world is—

Besides, you aren't as ugly or as filthy as you think you are. Zelgadis wanted to say that, but he couldn't speak because his mouth was full of food. He didn't have the face to speak of beauty, either. He silently funneled the provided meal into his stomach.

He was, by nature, a taciturn man.

He stayed and was indebted to Millianne for a while. He offered to pay for his lodging, but Millianne steadfastly refused. She was a fastidious and kind-hearted woman. One could even say she was a bit detached from the world.

To host a man of unknown origin in her own home... Even after seeing Zelgadis's true face and his rock-encrusted skin, she didn't show even a hint of disgust and served him devotedly.

Her skill in White Magic was impressive. There are many mages who, because they monopolize the means of treatment, act arrogantly and receive large rewards despite having second- or third-rate skills. Even just looking at the effectiveness of her healing, it was extraordinary; Zelgadis's wounds were completely healed in no time.

They had been light wounds to begin with. However, what with the fatigue of a traveling life, while he was lingering for a day or two, it became difficult to bring up the subject of parting, and he ended up staying for quite a long time. Millianne also held him back. She was likely worried that wounds could easily reopen right after healing, but she must have been lonely. She lived alone as a woman on a mountaintop

like this.

But this couldn't go on. When he was treated too kindly, the hatred that nested in his heart felt like it was being purified. He wasn't supposed to forget what he was living for. The summit was far too peaceful, too tranquil...

A dull blade can cut nothing. Zelgadis prepared for his journey, intending to depart immediately. It was already dark today. Perhaps tomorrow...

Zelgadis looked up at the night sky where stars had begun to twinkle. He was on the roof of Millianne's house. He liked high places. He had reached it in a single bound with Levitation, but he wondered how they had climbed it—many cats were curled up there. Becoming one of the herd, forgetting even that he was human, he watched the stars.

He saw the Fishman Nunsa dancing and spinning in circles—whether it was a walk or something else—so he averted his eyes and sat up.

"....."

Millianne was tending to one of the fields, which were divided quite unnaturally neatly when seen from a high position. At this hour after the sun had set. She was a diligent person.

She should just let earthen dolls do the field work, Zelgadis thought out of his lack of tact. But there were likely delicate tasks, and perhaps she enjoyed working with the soil.

Perhaps there could have been a life like this. Avoiding the eyes of others, secluded in the mountains, living with animals. Tilling the fields...

"Mr. Zelgadis," Millianne looked up and shouted a bit loudly so her voice would reach him. "If you don't rest quietly, you won't heal."

"I've already healed," Zelgadis replied by raising his hand, as it was too much trouble to raise his voice to be heard by Millianne on the ground. Perhaps thinking he would give them food, the cats that had been lying on the roof gathered around him with "meows." Some even audaciously climbed onto his head or back.

The master of this summit watched the strangely transformed Zelgadis with an amused look. She also looked a little bit lonely, though...

"About when will you be departing?"

"If I'm in the way, then right now."

"Never such a thing," Millianne shook her head. Her voice shouldn't have reached him, but did her feelings? Zelgadis was beginning to feel a faint sense of sympathy for this woman who lived hiding her skin with bandages, as if escaping from something.

If they lived together, they would come to know each other's hearts. To Zelgadis, who had sought to master the way of the sword to become strong and had lived a life of travel ever since, everything about her—settling down on a mountaintop like this and tilling the fields every day—was interesting. Even the way she cooked. Even the types of vegetables. Their conversations about magic also flourished, and she taught him several variations and new techniques.

He was only receiving. "Shall I help?" He called out when he saw Millianne struggling with a tree stump protruding from the field. Even a stump that wouldn't budge with a lever could be dug up immediately by Zelgadis. But it would be a struggle for a woman's slender arms; Millianne was incessantly wiping away sweat.

Her bandages slipped, and platinum-colored hair like gathered stardust spilled out. As if ashamed of it, Millianne hung her head. Her figure was weak and heart-wrenching...

And yet, she stubbornly shook her head. "I can't trouble you."

"A Vibration Bomb would do it in one shot."

"It would blow away the field as well," Millianne said thinly, yet clearly. "There are things that can only be done slowly and carefully."

"I see," Zelgadis said, and sat back down on the edge of the roof. On his shoulder, Nunsa, who had been floating unnaturally in the air, sat down heavily. Zelgadis felt that the creature's body had grown a bit larger than the other day.

"You’re an insensitive man..."

"I was told help was unnecessary."

"It’s a man’s job to stay by her side and support her in silence..."

"I would only be in the way. I'm clumsy, after all. Besides, don't talk about 'men' when you’re a 'male.'"

What a meticulous man, Nunsa made a face of disgust. "She is a lonelier woman than you think..." Nunsa spoke in his unique low voice.

Millianne was a talented girl born into a lineage of mages. She had lived on this mountaintop since her parents' generation, and when she had business, she would go down to the town at the foot of the mountain to prescribe medicine and provide treatment. Apparently, that was the life she had led. The reason she lived at the summit was that it was convenient for collecting medicinal herbs and materials for White Magic. The "Witch of the Mountain" seemed to be famous in the town.

There were not a few mages who lived such a life. Immersed in the research of magic in a place far from human habitation. An introverted, kind-hearted witch...

She also belonged properly to the Mage Guild—but the guild members in that town were of a wicked nature, and apparently, they took a cut of the rewards for her treatments. Therefore, she lived a simple, poor life. Even so, without a word of complaint, Millianne had lived thinking that was only natural. She assisted her mother until she died, and after taking over, she took on the treatment of the townspeople herself.

The misfortune was that the town was wealthy. There were precious metals that could only be collected in this region, and they made enormous profits by processing them into accessories and trading them. The lord of the town was wealthy, enough to build a magnificent white palace. That lord took a fancy to Millianne.

Her other misfortune was that she was more beautiful than anyone else. Millianne, living in the mountains, was unaware of her own beauty and walked through the town without hiding her face. The lord, who was playing around in cognito, set his eyes on her and fell passionately in love. To attract Millianne, the lord prepared a luxurious mansion in the town, urged her to live there, and gave her various expensive gifts. If that had been all, it might have reached a happy ending like a fairy-tale love story.

But the lord had a wife and children. He was an airheaded but good-hearted lord, and he was highly trusted by the townspeople. Millianne was called a witch who had beguiled him with suspicious magic. The women dressed in the beautiful clothes that were the town's specialty spread scandalous rumors. Out of jealousy. Out of malice. Or perhaps innocently, as a bit of small talk...

That reputation spread through the town in the blink of an eye, and finally, it reached the ears of the lord's wife—and everything was destroyed. Poor, naive Millianne had been healing the townspeople devotedly all along, without even accepting the gifts

from the lord, without even knowing their value.

One day, she was called to a hut on the outskirts of town on a request for treatment. She was set on fire and burned. Called a whore. Called a witch.

"Although she escaped with her life, the terrible persecution continues—" Nunsa looked into the distance as if pitying her. "The people of the town need treatment by White Magic and the like. Millianne doesn't know any other way of life, either; while she goes back and forth between the town and this hut on the summit, there are small interactions, but..."

Finally, he muttered in a muddy voice that sounded mixed with a sigh. "Millianne is lonely, shunned like a monster..."

The same as me, Zelgadis couldn't say it. He had strayed from the path of humanity due to his own foolishness. But what crime had she, Millianne, committed? The kind and lonely Millianne was still struggling with the stump.

At the very least... Zelgadis danced down to the ground with Levitation and gently stayed by Millianne's side. He didn't even know what words to say to her. He was, by nature, an inarticulate man.

"I'll help after all."

He put his strength into it as if hugging the stump. Soil fell away, and roots began to be exposed. Zelgadis possessed great strength; that was how he had been able to live alone. Millianne...

"Well then, as you wish." Millianne watched Zelgadis, looking just a little bit happy. The white witch wrapped in bandages—he wondered how many lives she had saved until now. It was as if she were experiencing someone's kindness for the first time in her life.

It was late that night. Zelgadis woke up in the livestock shed. Millianne had tried to offer him the bed in her house, but as expected, he felt guilty taking the host's bed. He had insisted on sleeping here, saying that he was used to it from his life of travel and that having a roof was better than sleeping outdoors.

It was a livestock shed behind the brick house. At the summit where there were so many animals, the particularly large ones slept here. It had been a few weeks' acquaintance, but after stroking the backs of the horses and sheep he had become somewhat familiar with, Zelgadis headed for the exit. He drew his single-edged sword

from its scabbard and let it shine in the moonlight filtering through the gaps in the shed. It was well-sharpened. Its sharpness shouldn't have dulled.

After confirming this, he returned it to the scabbard and hung it at his waist. A horse looked at him with round eyes as if asking where he was going, so he silenced it by putting a finger to his lips with a "shh." It would be a problem if it made a noise. After patting the horse's mane, he went outside.

It was quiet. Even so, for a few weeks, he had been in the midst of liveliness. That sound was echoing inside Zelgadis's cold, dry, hard skin. He stepped forward as if savoring it. He did some light flexibility exercises and checked the movement of his body. This, too, hadn't dulled much.

His wounds were completely healed. There was no pain, no bleeding. If so, there was no reason to stay here any longer.

"....."

He hesitated for a while whether he should say goodbye to Millianne, who had taken care of him at the end—then he gently opened the door of the unbolted brick house. It was brilliantly bright. The light of the lamps illuminated the room. At one of the worktables, Millianne was slumped over. She seemed to have fallen asleep in the middle of writing, still clutching a quill pen in one hand.

It was a cold season. A large dog or wolf that he often saw was huddled against her as if to warm her thin, shivering body. This one seemed to be awake and growled low at the sight of Zelgadis.

"I won't do anything. I just thought I'd say goodbye at the end—" He said to the dog, then suddenly looked at the water tank on the shelf. Nunsa was floating on his back on the water's surface. He wondered if he was dead, but he couldn't tell. He didn't care anyway.

"Nunsa," he called out, thinking he might be awake since his eyes were open, but there was no response. He seemed to be sleeping. Fish sleep with their eyes open. He wondered if Nunsa was like that too—while thinking about such relatively trivial things, he walked soundlessly like a cat.

He picked up a blanket from Millianne's bed and draped it over her shoulders as she slept sitting up. It was a season of profound cold. It would be a pity if she caught a cold. Zelgadis gently picked up a piece of bread that Millianne seemed to have left

uneaten and put it in his mouth. He would fill his stomach a little and depart. He had stayed a bit too long.

He took out a leather pouch containing gold coins and the like, thinking he would pay for his meals and lodging. After thinking for a bit, he stopped. It was an act that would ruin a woman's pride.

"Thank you, kind person." After telling Millianne's sleeping face that, Zelgadis stepped out into the freezing wind blowing outdoors. He gently closed the door and looked ahead. From here on, he was alone. Even though it had always been that way, for some reason, tonight was a bit lonely.

"Welcome to Pink City, the Town of Beauty and Accessories!"

It was so dark that the characters on the sign were almost illegible. Both the moon and stars were hidden by clouds, and darkness was pooling. Not a single house with a light could be seen. There were no figures walking with lamps, either. It was as if it were a town that had already perished.

Zelgadis, who had descended with Levitation, looked around and winced. It was a gloomy town. The mountaintop where Millianne lived with the animals had been livelier than this. There was no sign of anything. No sound, either.

"....."

Zelgadis walked quietly through the gaps between the buildings made of the white, smooth material that lined the streets. It was the middle of the night, everyone was sleeping soundly—it didn't feel like that. He couldn't hear even a single cough; he found what looked like a tavern, but there wasn't a single person.

It was unnatural. A shivering chill crawled up his spine. Had a plague broken out and wiped out the inhabitants, or had they been attacked by monsters and eaten or fled, regardless of age or gender—if so, there wasn't a single corpse. No smell of decay. Had the people of this town suddenly vanished as if melting into the air?

A town of beauty and accessories; that was likely actually true. Most of the shops he caught sight of were small, tidy-looking ones that handled such items, the kind women would like. Eerily lifelike dolls were dressed in lovely outfits and wore flirtatious smiles behind the glass for display.

He stepped into one of the shops. He would explore to see if there was at least any information or medicine related to the skin. That was why he had aimed for this town

and had walked a long way. To bring the skin of his own body—which looked as though it were encrusted with rock—even slightly closer to that of a proper human. Shaking off the warmth of that kind person. All alone, in the freezing night.

"Lighting!" He chanted the spell and lit a light at the tip of the single-edged sword he had drawn. He moved it as if stirring the inside of the shop.

As expected, there was no one. There was no sign that the products or anything had been ransacked, yet there was no security and the entrance was left wide open. It was as if only living things had vanished from the beginning, as if they had never existed.

He walked toward the counter where the shop assistants would serve customers, and since a bundle of papers was piled there, he picked it up. A lot of dust had accumulated; he gently blew on it. Under the brilliance of the flickering light, Zelgadis strained his eyes. He scrutinized its contents.

Newspaper articles and flyers for sales. A magazine that had likely circulated only in this town. A ledger where the shop's sales and the like were recorded. He read them diligently.

"What does this mean...?" Zelgadis muttered involuntarily.

This town seemed to have been a town of beauty and accessories, just as rumored and as claimed on the signs. Customers visited even from distant towns and bought products en masse... This was evident from the sales recorded in the ledger. It seemed they had made a huge profit, particularly the cosmetics were very popular.

"Everyone can have beautiful skin." "A beauty that would make any royalty or nobility, or even a monster, turn their heads." "For the lady who loves beauty." "Anyone can be a princess with this."

Cheerful sales pitches were overflowing in the flyers and magazines as if dancing. There was no sign of ruin anywhere; it was greatly at odds with the current state of the town, which seemed to have died out.

"Everyone can have beautiful skin, huh—" Interested, he looked for the cosmetics mentioned in the flyer. Zelgadis's skin had been synthesized with a rock golem and was far from that of a normal person; it wasn't something that could be fixed with normal cosmetics, but—at least enough to hide it.

Make-up was effeminate, but if he could live with his head held high without hiding

his face, he couldn't be picky.

"Pretending to be an ordinary person... what do I want to do?" He asked himself. Even if he decorated his face with make-up, the rock golem and evil spirit synthesized into this body would not disappear. He would only be pretending to be human. He would only be disguised. How was that different from a monster?

What would he gain by deceiving himself in that way? A peaceful dining table with someone? Smiles? The warmth of skin? Would it be love? That... even without wandering through this gloomy town, had been at that summit. And he had shaken it off.

"Is it this?" In the back of the counter, there was a small room where unauthorized persons were not allowed to enter, so he destroyed the lock with his physical strength and searched inside. There were several small bottles; those were the rumored cosmetics. He picked up one of them.

From what he could see, it was a commonplace item. A gaudy label was pasted on it, and a string of characters was lined up confidently, saying things like "money back if not effective." Since the ingredients were listed, he checked them. There was nothing particularly rare; he wasn't certain because he didn't have specialized knowledge. He opened the lid of the bottle, smelled it, and tasted the contents.

Zelgadis's eyes widened. He tasted blood and felt magical power. This is—

In that instant, a giant palm "loomed" out from the depths of the darkness.

Taking an impact as if he had been struck by a piece of driftwood, Zelgadis was knocked out of the shop. He tumbled along the street paved with the smooth white material and stood up, stretching out his curled-up body all at once. Perhaps his magical power had dispersed, for the light had gone out from the tip of the single-edged sword he was still clutching. He had no leeway to cast a new light.

Something was showing itself, emerging slowly from the back of the shop. A familiar monstrosity—

"This thing again," he cursed, watching it intently in the darkness.

Its height greatly exceeded his own. It had arms, it had legs, and it had a head. But its entire body was armored with a white, glossy material, the same as what covered the town's roads and buildings. A smooth earthen doll that was pure white. That was

the impression of the monster.

It looked the same as the entity that had attacked Zelgadis in the mountains and wounded him. He couldn't tell if it was the same individual or not; compared to the one he had first encountered, it reflected light better since it didn't have any dirt on it. It reflected the moonlight that had peeked through the clouds, and it was almost divine.

But he had no leeway to be moved; the white monster was coming straight toward him. Its movements were slow, but not monotonous like an earthen doll. It was strangely biological. It was clearly attacking with the intent to harm him.

If he didn't respond, it would be dangerous. Following his warrior instincts, Zelgadis kicked off the ground. He activated Shofuku (Raywing) and leaped vertically as if being launched.

The white monster passed violently beneath Zelgadis's feet. It had attempted a body slam. With that weight as it appeared, and if it possessed hardness equal to or greater than his own—an ordinary person would have been killed instantly just by the impact. Crossing the street with momentum, the white monster crashed headfirst into the building opposite.

Amidst the dancing fragments of the wall, it looked up at Zelgadis, who was flying in the air. It didn't look like it had sensory organs, but it was accurately recognizing him.

"Was it bad to enter the shop without permission?" He muttered, and canceled Shofuku at a considerable height. Gravity took over, and free-fall began.

He turned over thoughts in his head. The white monster had attacked as if it had been lying in wait for him in the shop. But Zelgadis had stepped into a random shop he had caught sight of without any particular intention. What were the odds that a white monster just happened to be there?

It wasn't a coincidence. If so...

Building a hypothesis in his brain, Zelgadis wove a spell. Shofuku was a spell that was difficult to control and maintain, and while flying, he couldn't chant other spells. If he were to attack, he had no choice but to cancel it. He had considered just flying away, but—he had a grudge for being wounded by the white monster, and he also felt like investigating it a little.

As if testing it, Zelgadis fell slowly with his cloak fluttering. At his destination stood

the vaguely looming white monster.

"Fireball!" He pointed at the enemy and chanted. In an instant, a burning orb of light was generated at Zelgadis's fingertip and shot through the air, scattering sparks. It caused a large explosion the moment it contacted the white monster. The blast of the flames dyed the darkness-submerged town white for a moment.

To his surprise, the white monster that had taken a direct hit from the Fireball only staggered back a few steps. It was almost unhurt, with only a scorched mark on its surface. It was an unbelievable hardness.

But of course, Zelgadis didn't think he could finish it off so easily. He took the blast with his cloak and moved through the air as if swimming. He killed the momentum of his fall and landed on the roof of a building. At the same time, the new spell he had been weaving was activated.

"Ice Arrow!" He aimed at the white monster with an attack spell that was simplified for quick casting. The formed ice arrow approached the white monster with irregular movements and struck it repeatedly. The frozen air sparkled brilliantly.

It was a spell with almost no power. However, various parts of the white monster's body were frozen and adhered to the ground and the building it was still touching. The white monster was huge; it wasn't enough to freeze its entire body, but—it could slightly limit its movements.

In the meantime, Zelgadis was moving with the movements of a wild beast. He kicked the roof of the building his feet had been on and leaped straight at the white monster. He gripped the single-edged sword he had drawn with both hands and thrust it into the white monster with all his might. It was a thrust that put all his weight and momentum into it; it was accurately sucked into the enemy's abdomen.

No matter how hard a monster it was, after being exposed to heat and cold in succession from the Fireball and Ice Arrow—it would become brittle from the sudden temperature difference. The single-edged sword put a crack in the white monster's abdomen and was deeply impaled.

This wasn't the end. Until he finished it off, Rezo's Berserker would not be careless.

"Lightning!" He activated his final spell. A twisted light of thunder sprayed up in a thread-like shape with the single-edged sword as the center.

It was a basic thunder spell; originally, it would only have enough power to slightly

paralyze even a human opponent. But if he conducted it through the blade and let the electric shock penetrate deep into the body...

The white monster convulsed and collapsed from its knees with a roar.

It worked. Zelgadis reached a conclusion from that fact. As he thought, despite its appearance, it wasn't an earthen doll. Soil and rock do not conduct electricity well. If it was a creature that moved its muscles with electricity and also circulated blood and the like—it would be numbed by a lightning strike.

This thing was a living being. Of blood, skin, and meat—

Stubbornly, the white monster raised its face and its hands. It was sturdier than he had thought. Zelgadis nonchalantly stepped on the white monster's head to pin it to the ground and held his single-edged sword to its neck. He stepped on the side without the blade with his sole and put all his weight on it.

The head was cut off. Blood sprayed.

This time, the white monster stopped moving.

"Blood, huh," Zelgadis clicked his tongue as he was stained by the spray of blood. Blood flowed, and there was a brain in the head. Therefore, it had stopped moving when its head was cut off. It had died. It was a creature, and one close to human—no, perhaps...

A nasty imagination swelled in his head. But he didn't have the leeway to think yet. From everywhere in the quiet town, the sound of dragging rock echoed. The ground was shaking. From the depths of the darkness, countless white monsters were showing themselves one after another.

Just finishing off one had been a fair amount of heavy labor. It would be tough to take on this many. Even if he wanted to investigate the white monster he had defeated, he didn't seem to have the time for such trouble. And besides, there was no longer any need for that. His hypothesis was about to bear fruit. After that...

Zelgadis took off his blood-stained cloak and threw it into the air indifferently. With his true face, he barked at the approaching white monsters.

"My name is Zelgadis Graywords!" He didn't think he was facing an opponent that understood words, but if it could avoid pointless killing... He swung his blade once to scatter the blood. He didn't put it in the scabbard, but held it in the correct posture

for a swordsman. "Step aside."

He walked straight, without flinching. He had considered jumping over them with Shofuku, but his head was white-hot and he couldn't weave a spell. A nasty imagination was swirling, and Zelgadis couldn't stay calm. He was also in the mood for a rampage.

"I'm going back—no, I have a place I ought to go." After declaring this, there was no reply, so thereafter there were no more words... Zelgadis plunged into the herd of white monsters in silence.

The door of the brick house creaked open. Zelgadis, who had fought a death match with the white monsters in the town, was breathless but looked to the right, looked to the left, and immediately returned his gaze to the front.

It was incredibly bright, even though it was the middle of the night. A fireplace was lit. In front of it, Millianne was sitting. She seemed to be re-wrapping her bandages. Her shoulders were bared from the simple clothing she wore, and she was tightly wrapping a bandage around her left arm with her right hand with such intensity it felt obsessive. She kept doing that without even looking back.

"It will be cold if you leave the door open."

She told the standing Zelgadis, who didn't know what words to say to her. The beautiful platinum-colored hair that was usually hidden by bandages hung down her back like fresh milk. "It doesn't seem like the kind of thing you would do—you who draped a blanket over me."

She spoke calmly, and Zelgadis turned red and looked down. "Should I have knocked?"

Millianne was silent for a while as if she didn't understand the meaning—then she laughed modestly, like the sound of rolling bells. "Excuse me."

She wrapped the bandages tightly so that her skin was not exposed, and after carefully putting her sleeves through her clothes, she touched and fixed her collar. The gesture, which had a sense of everyday life, was somehow incongruous. A piece of firewood popped in the fireplace.

"I went to the town." He spoke shortly, but the next words didn't come. There were doubts and hypotheses in his head. But the moment he put them into words, this peaceful scene in front of him would vanish.

"...Did Mr. Nunsa ask you to?" Still without looking here, Millianne tilted her chin toward the water tank placed in the corner of the room. As for Nunsa—he was still floating on his back, as before, perhaps still sleeping.

Zelgadis put his hand to the single-edged sword hung at his waist and said as if groaning, "I live for myself."

"We're similar, aren't we?" After saying that, Millianne shook her head weakly. "No—that is the point of difference between us." As if confessing. "I have neglected to live for myself. Doing as I was told by my mother, tilling the fields, tending to the livestock, making medicine, and serving the people of the town. Like a wooden puppet without a heart."

Standing up slowly, Millianne held her hands over the bonfire, shivering as if she had frozen. She stirred the fire with a poker. "It must have been cold outside; warm yourself." Her voice was not disturbed. It was as if she had been waiting for this moment all along.

"Everyone wanted a me that was convenient for others—a me that served and devoted myself like a slave. Fortunately or unfortunately, the me of the past was beautiful. I was loved as a pretty, convenient doll."

"The current you is beautiful, too." At the words Zelgadis spoke from his heart, Millianne didn't particularly react. After a short while, she finally turned around.

"...Even this?" In the backlight of the bonfire, her face was almost in shadow. It was the first time he had seen her true face without the bandages, and indeed she was likely a peerless beauty. In such a remote, boring town, that beauty was even strange. She was a witch. To the people of the town, she was an unknown, dangerous monster.

However, now her nose was sliced off, and the skin of her cheeks, forehead, and lips was peeled away. Muscles and blood vessels were plainly visible.

In that instant, Zelgadis understood everything. He was shocked that his hypothesis had come true, and he flinched—if that had made her think he was disgusted or surprised by her true face, it was a failure. If he had hurt her...

Zelgadis stepped forward. So that his own rock-encrusted skin, not hidden by a hood, was plainly visible to Millianne. "You were loved by an unthinking lord, and because of that jealousy you were deceived and burned... That's what I heard. Did you take revenge for that?"

"I wonder." Millianne looked straight at Zelgadis without averting her eyes. "I won't say I didn't have such feelings; having my skin scorched and burned was an agony of hell. It wouldn't be shameless to resent it, since I did nothing wrong."

She let out a tired sigh and gently stroked the back of the large dog that was staying by her side. She protected and loved the livestock and domestic animals that had escaped from the town. Surely animals don't consider the beauty of appearance. No matter how filthy or hideous the face, animals stay by one's side and love without concern. She made that the comfort of her heart...

Zelgadis was ashamed of his words from a moment ago. She was not the kind of person to take revenge. She had been trampled and had groundless malice directed at her, yet she loved the pitiful animals. She was a wounded, exhausted woman who had distanced herself and lived quietly on this mountaintop.

But surely—it was she who had destroyed the town.

"I was trying to make atonement. It's lonely just being resented and hated. No—was I trying to confirm it? I was testing them—since I was just a beautiful little girl who knew nothing." She picked up one of the small bottles lined up in the room and moved it lightly. Bubbles overflowed from the liquid in the stirred bottle.

"This is a secret medicine brewed by utilizing the knowledge of pharmacology and White Magic inherited from my mother, with my own skin as the raw material... If you apply this to your skin, you can obtain the same beauty as me."

He had heard that she researched magic and the like at the summit, and occasionally went down to the town to perform White Magic and sell medicine. The cosmetics sold in the shops had originally been her results.

"If it's a woman, everyone wants to be beautiful. At first, even the townspeople—who suspected I would take the revenge they thought I was entitled to—secretly, one by one, used my secret medicine. And each obtained the glossiness of skin and beauty that they idealized."

Millianne hung her head as if hugging herself. She had said her skin was the raw material. She had gradually lost her skin for that reason and had worn bandages to hide her true face. Without skin, bacteria and the like could easily enter and she would be prone to disease. He had thought it was a burn or something left from when she was burned—

She had voluntarily abandoned her beautiful skin and hidden it behind the bandages. "If everyone became the same as me, no one would envy me anymore. They wouldn't be jealous, and the lord and everyone would have their extra emotions removed and would just like each other. I was supposed to be able to go back to the same peaceful, ordinary life as before, selling medicine and healing people with White Magic."

Zelgadis suddenly noticed. The arrangement of various things placed in the room had shifted. No, they were moving little by little. The roots of eerie trees, the powdered gems, the lined-up small bottles... While carrying magical power, they were moving cleverly and steadily.

"For a while, things went as I thought they would. My purpose was successfully fulfilled. But one day—suddenly, I became sad. Even if I walked through the town, no one looked at me. Even the lord, who had proposed to me so passionately, was in love with his beautiful wife. I was supposed to be wishing for that, so why...?"

Why didn't I notice sooner? This house itself was a giant magic circle. Magical mediums were arranged according to the diagram and were aiming for one direction. All that was needed was for the one who made this magic circle—Millianne—to wish for it, and the magic would be activated. Enormous magical power was swirling in the chaotic room.

"I was loved. Because I was beautiful. Everyone praised me, and envied me enough to want to burn me to death." But, Millianne covered her face and sobbed. "I realized. It wasn't me that was loved."

And the magic was completed. "All everyone loved was my beauty."

At the same time as the activation of the magic, Zelgadis was struck by the swirling magical power and was blown backward, spinning several times. The glimpse he caught of Millianne showed her weeping uncontrollably.

He barely managed to activate Shofuku (Raywing) in time and made an emergency departure, gliding backward. He flew in an arc toward the sky, which had rapidly become covered by dark clouds.

The view below was hellish. The house on the mountaintop where Zelgadis had been until a moment ago had crumbled easily, exposing something strange from beneath its charming exterior. It looked like a gigantic skeletal corpse. It was a giant body made of a mysterious, smooth material. Only the upper half of such a pure white, bone-like thing was towering over the summit. It was as if the white monsters Zelgadis had

encountered in the town had been made even more unimaginably huge.

Around that white giant god, the earth of the mountaintop was also transforming. The smooth material that had neatly covered the ground was heaving and bulging, becoming strangely knotted arms and legs, heads of old people and babies, wings and horns and tails—transforming into strange works of art and writhing about. The field that Millianne had been so diligently tilling was also being crushed by those white things, being crushed by the white material that moved biologically as if blinking; the vegetables had their leaves torn off and burst.

Even the animals she had cherished were being pierced by the white things that had turned into blades, letting out cries of pain and withering away. Their life force was being sucked out, and they were incorporated into and became part of the white things.

It had been beautiful and orderly only on the surface. Once the skin was peeled back, it was hell. Everything of the white material that had covered this mountaintop was a giant, amorphous, strange monster.

The center of it was Millianne. In the brick house where the magic circle had been laid—while being showered by various things that were crumbling like rain—she had not yet moved. She was hanging her head in front of the fireplace, which was being crushed while scattering sparks. In her lap, the large dog that was always closest to her gently rested its weight. Millianne was stroking it.

She, who had been loved, hated, and betrayed by people, and for whom only animals were the comfort of her heart. He didn't think he could understand her feelings. Their circumstances were different. They were a man and a woman. The weight of the beauty of appearance was different—but Zelgadis should have been sympathizing with her. By understanding even just a little and staying by her side.

Even with her painfully peeled skin. Even with his rock-encrusted skin. If they had touched, they might have been able to share their warmth.

"Millianne!"

For the first time, he called her name. It was a shout that shook everything on the mountaintop that was transforming into a sinister monster—no, that was exposing its true nature. Millianne reacted with a start and looked up. The dust was blowing, and her figure could hardly be seen anymore.

But at the end, he felt her lips had woven words. "Mr. Zelgadis." They had only called each other's names, and without any further conversation... They were, after all, just a man and a woman who had happened to spend a few weeks eating and sleeping together. They were not in a deep enough relationship to whisper of love. There were no more words to exchange.

Zelgadis was, by nature, a taciturn man.

Covering her face and weeping, Millianne moved her mouth "flap-flap." Had she said "run away," or "I'm sorry"—or was it just a wordless cry? A roar drowned out everything.

In the meantime, the final abnormality occurred. The large dog lying in Millianne's lap melted. That dog with pure white fur was divided into thin, thread-like pieces and became entangled in Millianne's still-exposed true face, her chest, her waist, and her hips, tearing her clothes. Those threads and the bandages wound around all of Millianne, covering and tightening. And then they sank into her skin. They were becoming one.

Zelgadis instantly canceled Shofuku and fell from high altitude according to gravity, weaving a new spell. He unleashed a Flame Arrow. The crimson arrow that pierced the air while shining struck the white things that had Millianne's skin in a bind. It was an attack spell with low lethality, but it should have been enough to scorch and burn away the bandages.

But the white things that had fused with Millianne's skin easily repelled the attack spell. Did they have hardness equal to or greater than those white monsters—no, he had a sensation that it simply hadn't reached her.

"A pure demon?" Continuing his fall, Zelgadis landed on the middle of the mountain. His feet were buried in the soft soil by his own weight, so he scrambled out. He spat out the soil that had got into his mouth along with saliva.

He understood the structure. Millianne was of a lineage of mages. Her specialty seemed to be White Magic, but anyone involved with magic cannot be unrelated to the existence of demons. In the process of touching Black Magic, which borrows the power of demons and also utilizes them—her heart was eroded by it, invaded and her soul polluted, and she was turned into a monster.

A pure demon had invaded this world in response to the despair, anger, sadness, and lamentation of Millianne, who had been betrayed and almost burned to death. And it

had possessed her, melted into her, and was moving her.

For what purpose? It was decided. The desire of demons is the chaos and confusion, despair and fear, and collapse of this world. It had utilized Millianne and had expanded and scattered the sorrow and malice swirling in her heart.

The medicine made from her skin, which Millianne was said to have walked around selling, the cosmetics, had spread to the townspeople. But they were the demon's terminals. One day, they all sprouted at once, ate through the people's skin and internal organs, covered them, and turned them into those white monsters. The white monsters he had fought in the town were things that bled. They were the remnants of humans who had been let out a groan of despair while their meat, bones, and everything of their bodies were slowly eaten by the white things covering their skin. They were kept alive but not allowed to die, turned into nurseries to please the demon, and were in the middle of dying while their entire bodies were being devoured.

The demons must have loved such despair and fear. It must have been a wonderful banquet. The town had perished. And so had the people living there. If left alone, Millianne's despair would spread to the whole world. The earth would be covered in pure white sadness, carved up, and turned into a wasteland where not even grass or trees would grow.

He didn't care what happened to the world. Zelgadis lives only for himself. That was supposed to be the case, but there was indignation in his heart.

Millianne's wish, to just live in peace, had been granted in the worst way. Everyone was covered in white things, their movements stopped, and they lived forever without envying or cursing others. While their entire bodies were being eaten by a demon...

He had asked if it was revenge. Millianne had nodded vaguely, saying it might be. Of course. An innocent woman who was just living peacefully had groundless jealousy directed at her and was burned as a witch. If she hadn't resented anyone after that, her heart would have been broken. She was an ordinary woman. She was kind to travelers, sweated while tilling the fields, and raised animals. A demon had used such a woman's desire for revenge, her hatred, and her sadness to create this hell.

It was unforgivable. She just wanted to live in peace.

"Millianne." Calling the woman's name, Zelgadis again activated Shofuku in the middle of the mountain where a landslide had occurred. He flew vertically. Straight to the

summit again.

With dust rising, everything was crumbling and had lost its original form, neither the brick house nor the orderly fields. They were ruled by the writhing white things. In the center of it was Millianne. Her entire skin was covered with the smooth material, and she was unmoving like an ancient divine statue. Her lower half was buried in the mountain, moving the writhing white things like hands and feet. Zelgadis looked down from a high altitude at her, who had turned into a giant white demon god.

"Millianne." He called her name many times, but there was no response from the woman. Covered in white things, nothing reached her anymore.

The white things swirling at the summit took the form of blades and came at Zelgadis all at once. If each one had hardness equal to or greater than the white monsters, even Zelgadis with his rock-golem skin would be easily skewered.

But Zelgadis instantly canceled Shofuku and fell while letting his hair and clothes flutter. He hadn't given up. He made a calm judgment. The white blades had not reached him yet. The completion of the spell he was weaving should be just a little bit faster. No matter how powerful a weapon, it’s meaningless if it doesn't reach. The one who inflicts a fatal wound more quickly and accurately on the opponent wins. He would survive. That was how he had lived.

Millianne was a kind woman. This monster born from her heart was also not used to combat, to killing each other. That was Zelgadis's only chance for survival. It was indeed powerful; if it were a pure demon, it wouldn't even accept normal attack magic. It was invincible.

But... long ago, he had wanted to be stronger than anyone. For that, he had strayed from the path of humanity. If there were a meaning to Zelgadis having become strong—

"I..." He was about to declare something. A reply to what Millianne had been trying to say at the end. But her voice hadn't reached him, and he was also inarticulate. He was also in the middle of chanting a spell.

Thinking only of things like the way Millianne wiped away sweat while doing field work, the way she gently stroked the animals staying by her side, her beautiful eyes peeking through the gaps in the bandages when she covered her face in embarrassment...

Just as the white blades that were writhing and approaching were about to pierce him. Zelgadis activated the spell. That spell, which is ranked alongside the Dragon Slave as the strongest attack spell in Shamanistic Magic—Ra-Tilt (Astral Vine).

Zelgadis learned that he, too, could still shed tears.

Morning sun rose over the mountaintop, which had been pierced by the pale blue flame of the Ra-Tilt. Ra-Tilt, which had the strongest power but could only attack individuals and did not involve large-scale destruction, was the spell used. The damage caused by the magic was not so much. But the mountaintop where Millianne, who had taken a direct hit, had literally taken root was greatly gouged, and white things were sticking out here and there like protruding bones.

It was quiet. In the gaps between the towering white things, Millianne was lying. Ra-Tilt, which burns away the spirit, instantly destroys even a pure demon. Of course, she who had been unified with it was also—

"I'm sorry." Zelgadis walked over to the woman and knelt. "I had no way to stop you without killing you."

Because she had been pierced by the Ra-Tilt, which involved almost no physical destruction, Millianne had almost no external wounds. She had a beautiful dead face. The white bandages that had bound her entire body were also about to disappear with the destruction of the demon, turning into white powder and dancing in the wind.

Everything was crumbling. The numerous white things towering over the summit, and likely the white monsters—remnants of the inhabitants who had been wandering through the town—were also melting and disappearing in the morning sun like the monsters of a fairy tale. As if everything had been a bad dream.

What remained was the unceremoniously gouged, uneven mountaintop. But time would soon cover that as well. The earth that Millianne had tilled was fertile, and grass and trees would soon sprout; the power of life would turn even the mountaintop landscape created by her sadness and despair into a thing of the past. And the world would forget everything and keep turning today and tomorrow, forever.

The pure demon's plot to stain the world with despair had been crushed. Plot... perhaps it wasn't even that; maybe it was just a half-hearted game, for fun. He would not forget that a woman had been deeply involved in it, toyed with, and had lost her life. Zelgadis dug into the soft soil, which was still exposed, with his blood-smeared

single-edged sword. At the very least, a grave marker.

If it were a Vibration Bomb, it would be done in one shot. But there were things that should be done slowly and carefully—the lonely, kind woman had taught him that.

"It is fine." Millianne unexpectedly blinked. The Ra-Tilt should have struck her directly. Not even a single fragment of her soul or heart should have remained. Therefore, it was a miracle. Or perhaps it was a hallucination that Zelgadis had heard?

"I have lived looking down all along." Millianne smiled quietly while lying on her back. "At least, I want to die looking up at the sky."

"I see." Zelgadis couldn't think of any other words and just put his single-edged sword in its scabbard. While still kneeling in silence, he thought about what he could do.

He couldn't speak any clever lines. He didn't know any words of prayer. He wasn't even allowed to wish for the peace of this woman's soul. Even if he were to try to see her off with a smile, he had this face. It would only be eerie. Only tears were overflowing.

"Thank you, kind person." Using the lines she had heard somewhere, Millianne spoke on her exhausted breath. "I am a witch. Therefore I can see, I can tell—" She extended her trembling fingertip to Zelgadis. As if to treat him like a child, she tried to stroke his head. Lovingly. "Your mental state... is very beautiful..."

That hand didn't reach anywhere, fell gently, and stopped moving.

There was a woman named Millianne who lived quietly on a mountaintop where no one entered. She ended a life full of pain with a smile.

The skin of Millianne, which he had touched for the first time, had a soft and kind touch. Warmth remained. He once pressed her extended fingertip to his own cheek, then folded them over her chest. She should sleep in peace.

Zelgadis looked up at the sky, then stood up. He started walking. He wouldn't look back anymore.

"What will you do now?" He asked himself, then gave a wry smile. He had developed a habit of speaking aloud. It was the aftereffect of having spent a short, lively time. He became silent and made his way into the mountains. He walked through the trackless

wilds, all alone, as if dragging a heavy boulder.

The consumption from the Ra-Tilt was intense. His training was still not enough. He would temper himself more, become stronger, and thereafter—what should he do? How should he live? Without a destination, but with his eyes fixed ahead, Zelgadis advanced.

A weight landed on his shoulder. Feeling unpleasant, he looked and saw—where had he been until now?—the Fishman Nunsa, sitting with an audacious attitude. He was again puffing away on something like a cigarette.

"Hey." When he opened his mouth to complain, Nunsa shook his head, as if to say 'say nothing.' "Don't be angry. There's no need to be sad, either; you should be laughing—" He twisted his lips in an annoying way. "Life is made of partings..."

I want to part with you right now, but I can't because I don't have enough magical power. I'm so unpleasant I'm likely to go mad, Zelgadis wanted to shower him with abuse, but he didn't have the energy for it. He was, by nature, a taciturn man.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help or offer any advice..." Nunsa spoke in a nonchalant manner, casually using Zelgadis's head as a backrest. "I was indebted to Millianne. Just like the other animals I was picked up, and I was given peace for a long time..." The mysterious fish spoke his monologue with a bit of solemnity. "I wanted to repay that favor, but apparently the pure demon disguised as a dog thought I was an eyesore. I was attacked and was on the verge of death..."

Come to think of it, this guy had been floating on his back in the water tank. He hadn't been sleeping, but had been on the verge of death? It was hard to tell. Likely, Zelgadis catching him with his fishing line in the mountain stream had also been a critical situation—he had been attacked by the pure demon and had escaped while breathless, or had been thrown into the river. He, too, had been fighting. To repay the favor of the woman who had taken care of him. Although he hadn't been of any use.

He's likely not a bad creature, Zelgadis judged. If so, it was fine. His shoulder was a bit heavy and smelled fishy, though. They say 'traveling is with a companion, the world is with compassion'; he would at least be someone to talk to.

"I'm sorry I got you involved—" Nunsa made a gesture like bowing his head, quite seriously. "Thanks to you, Millianne was able to pass away with a smile..."

Zelgadis glared sideways at the fish who was taking it easy using him as a vehicle. "What are you, anyway?"

He didn't feel like just a strange creature that happened to be passing by or living in the neighborhood. He shouldn't have just happened to be caught on the fishing line Zelgadis had dropped. He had been overly familiar and had a look of knowing everything from the beginning.

Maybe. If the nightmare-like events Millianne had stirred up were just an extra, and were just a passing point in the fate that Zelgadis bore. Nunsa let out a sigh, even though he was a fish, and told him without slurring the end of his words for once.

"I am a subordinate of Red Priest Rezo."

Zelgadis was speechless. Literally, he lost his words. His whole body shook like a fever. "'Stop such useless things as a journey to find yourself as soon as possible, and come back,' apparently he said..."

Nunsa told him this in a lazy tone, and Zelgadis groaned. "With that protective air—"

"The time has come to face your fate, Rezo's Berserker..."

Zelgadis couldn't stand Nunsa as he spoke with a knowing face, grabbed him, and threw him away with all his might. Performing a U-turn and returning, the fish again strutted onto Zelgadis's shoulder.

He didn't want to look in that direction. His willpower to move forward also wavered. Stopping, Zelgadis looked back. The mountaintop was already far away and couldn't be seen. But beyond the treetops, there had been a kind, ordinary woman. In the few weeks he had spent with her, Zelgadis had lodged at least a little warmth deep inside this rock-encrusted skin. If he didn't let go of that...

He wondered if he, too, would be able to pass away with a smile.

For a while in silence, Zelgadis stood still. At the least, he tried to say goodbye to Millianne, who had been kinder and more foolish than anyone. Life is made of partings—even he, who was synthesized with a rock golem and an evil spirit, was walking through life. He wanted to at least give thanks to those he met and part cleanly. Otherwise, he couldn't move forward. Not even a single step.

But by nature, Zelgadis was an unsociable man. He didn't know clearly what he should do. He wasn't young enough to wave his hand with a 'bye-bye,' and just bowing his

head felt too curt. He didn't even know a clever way to part; he was frustrated with his own unpolished self.

When Nunsa peeked at his face as if hurrying him, Zelgadis shook his head. He just closed his eyes, prayed for the repose of the woman's soul, and pointed his feet in the direction he was going.

He didn't yet have the strength to part with someone with a smile like Millianne. He was still halfway through his journey. He would become stronger, undergo more training, and grow robustly. And if he could have enough pride in himself to live with his head held high without looking down, then he would again point his feet toward this quiet summit. And with a smile, this time he would truly say goodbye—

Until that day, he would walk looking forward.

Holding that warmth in his heart.

Marianne’s Skin: The End

Lina Inverse Extermination

"Here you go! One creamy white stew with plenty of mushrooms and a bandit-style wild boar steak!"

"I've been waiting for this!"

I was already losing the battle against the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen. The moment the cafeteria lady set the plates down, I grabbed my knife and fork and went to work on lunch.

First, a mouthful of the white stew.

...Mmm, delicious.

It was easily as good as the legendary *Nigi-take* mushrooms. I really have to thank that plain-looking woman who told me about this place.

"Hey, ma'am! Is there *Nigi-take* in this stew?"

"Haha, we can't afford luxury goods like that in a rural inn like this. Those are *Migi-take*. They're a hidden local specialty picked deep in those mountains over there."

I'd asked as a joke, but she gave me a name that sounded like a cheap knock-off.

"Huh. If they're this good, you'd think they'd be more famous."

"Normally they're much smaller, but lately, we've been picking some huge ones. Hopefully, more people will start coming here just for the *Migi-take*."

"In that case, I better eat my fill while I can."

As I chatted with her, I couldn't help but wonder about those "suddenly large" mushrooms, but they tasted too good to complain. I took another bite of stew.

"That mountain is right along the border of Rehard and Luvinagard, so you have to be

careful or the soldiers will get mad at you," she added.

"Wait, is this place close to the Rehard border?"

I was currently in the Kingdom of Selenius, one of the small nations in the Coastal States Union. After some recent "trouble," I really didn't want to go anywhere near Rehard. I chewed thoughtfully on a piece of bacon.

"Yeah, the border is just two mountains over. Back when my great-great-grandmother was a girl, there was a mine there that three countries fought over. It's been abandoned for a long time, though there are still some old fort ruins left behind."

Hmm, abandoned mines and forts. Might be worth checking out to see if any bandits have moved in. It'd be a nice bit of social service, and it'd line my pockets too—killing two birds with one stone.

While we were talking, my bowl somehow became empty. I ordered a second helping and started on the boar steak. This was great too; the garlic sauce and *Migi-take* powder masked the gaminess of the meat, bringing out only a wild, intense savory flavor.

After settling my stomach with about twenty refills, I moved on to fragrant grilled *Migi-take* skewers and some wonderfully textured *Migi-take* sashimi. I'd only ended up in Selenius because of that hopeless secret agent Miriella, but if the food was this good, I felt like all my hard work was being rewarded. Shaking the thought of Miriella out of my head, I focused entirely on the mushrooms.

"Emergency! Lina Inverse has appeared!"

Pffft! Hearing the man burst into the dining hall, I sprayed a massive cloud of orange juice out of my mouth. Avoiding eye contact with the now-stained table, I looked at the newcomers. A group of guys in leather armor—local militia types—were huddled at a table with dead-serious expressions.

"Again!?"

"What did she hit this time?"

"I heard a whole cow was taken from the ranch!"

"Damn it, was it because of the clouds yesterday? There were still three days until the new moon, we let our guard down!"

"That Lina Inverse... devouring all the pigs and chickens wasn't enough, now she's after the cattle..."

Hey! I've run into plenty of imposters before, but this one was particularly nasty. Usually, if you go to protest your innocence in these situations, you just get dragged into the mess, so I decided to listen a bit longer...

But then, a figure burst in and ruined my peaceful plan.

"Lina-san! I found you!"

"—Did you say Lina!?"

"Lina Inverse showed up in broad daylight!?"

The militia guys jumped up at Miriella's careless words. I quickly covered Miriella's mouth and tried to smooth things over.

"No, no, you misheard! She said *Ri-ina*!"

"Oh. Don't confuse us like that."

"Mmph! Why are you covering my mouth, Lina-sa—"

Wham. I delivered a body blow to Miriella to shut her up before she could ruin the cover again. I'd gathered that this "Lina Inverse" was some kind of pest like a bear or a bandit, and these bearded guys were the village watch.

After the militia left, I interrogated—I mean, asked Miriella for an explanation.

"So... what do you want? Actually, explain what's going on."

Even a klutz like her is a Selenius agent; if she's come all the way to this rural village, it has to be related to those men.

"Well... in the villages near the Rehard border, there have been frequent incidents of a mysterious creature using your name, Lina-san, to raid livestock and crops on moonless nights."

"A mysterious creature?"

"Yes. Apparently, it looks like a large human with pale blue skin and small horns on its forehead."

...That description sounded familiar.

"And why is this thing being called by my name?"

"Um, well, that's..."

"—That is the fault of the Rehard intelligence agents."

Before I knew it, a woman with a plain, unremarkable face was standing behind Miriella in a strange pose. Her face was so bland you'd forget it the moment you looked away.

"Melody-san!"

"That was my codename for the last mission. My name now is Naga the White Ser—"

"STOP!"

I cut Miriella off with everything I had. If she actually called out that name, the *real* Naga might appear, and if she shows up, the trouble triples.

"Plain-face's name is Melody. No arguments. It's a pseudonym, so it's fine."

"Well, I don't mind," the woman said.

You don't!? I shouted internally.

"Anyway, back to the point. What do you mean it's the Rehard agents' fault?"

Selenius and Rehard are neighbors, but they hate each other. I only ended up here because Miriella got herself chased by Rehard agents and dragged me into it.

"The Rehard agents tracking this creature heard a voice groaning 'Lina Inverse' with deep resentment from a fort that seemed to be its hideout. So, they concluded the creature's name was Lina Inverse."

"HEY! That logic is completely backward! Anyone with a brain would assume the mastermind behind the creature holds a grudge against me!"

"Be that as it may, that was the conclusion the Rehard agents reached," Melody said, smiling politely.

Then I remembered. One of those Rehard agents had said something...

'Our meticulous investigation has revealed that the real Lina Inverse has a massive build, pale blue skin, and small horns on her forehead which she hides with her bangs, and she only operates on moonless nights!'

At the time, I just thought, *'Meticulous investigation?'* and felt sorry for their brains, but I didn't realize there was a real incident behind it.

"So, did you come all this way just to tell me that?"

"We want you to accompany us on the investigation~!" Miriella pleaded, clenching her hands. The streaming tears were annoying.

"I see. I get the situation—"

"S-so...!" Miriella's face lit up with joy.

"—Yeah, no. Do your best on your own."

I gave her a bright smile and a cold refusal. I planned to settle the score with whoever was using my name, but I had no intention of babysitting Miriella, who was a confirmed dead weight.

"Please! We'll pay you a reward!"

A reward... I remembered the measly amount I got for guarding her before.

"If you pay me twenty gold coins, I'll go as far as the hideout. But only for five days."

"In addition, we need you to exterminate any of those creatures we encounter."

"Should I just wipe out the whole hideout?" I asked. It'd be faster to just level the mountain with a Dragon Slave from a distance. Twenty gold coins for one spell isn't a bad deal.

"Please do not use large-scale spells. We don't want a war with Rehard," Melody cautioned.

"Fine. Then I'll handle enemies along the way as long as they're within range. I'm not

chasing down runaways."

"Understood. The investigation is the priority; the extermination is just a bonus."

"Okay, under those conditions, no problem."

We headed upstream along the river. According to Miriella's map, it was a shortcut. The sky was overcast, so I figured if it started raining, we'd have to head into the forest. The woods were damp and dark—ideal for mushrooms, but not for hiking.

"L-Lina-san... let's take a break."

"No. Use your willpower."

We'd only been walking for an hour. If I matched her pace, we'd never reach the ruins.

Eventually, we hit a five-meter waterfall. Climbing it looked like a pain.

"Miriella, grab on."

"Huh!?"

She clung to me with a look of pure terror, probably traumatized from the last time I flew.

"Levitation."

We floated up slowly to the top. It's too slow for combat, but it's an easy spell to control for travel. By sunset, we reached the base of the mountain where the fort was located.

"I... can't... move..."

"How pathetic."

When I told her we were camping, she collapsed like a puddle of slime. I went into the woods to find firewood and—jackpot! I found some *Migi-take*.

Strangely, even though they grew in clusters, some were worm-eaten and others were perfectly clean. I picked both, went back, started a fire, and headed to the river to

catch some fish. I pulled out a few strands of my hair to use as fishing line, tied it to a branch, and attached a hook I keep in my luggage.

I used a "Fish-Attracting Spell (Provisional)" and pulled in ten large trout in no time. The smell of the roasting fish and mushrooms soon brought Miriella back to life.

"It smells so good..."

She reached out a hand, but I slapped it away.

"No work, no food! You didn't pick wood, fish, or mushrooms."

"Lina-san, you're so mean..." She moped and chewed on her dry rations, staring at my food.

"Fine, have this—"

Before I could finish, she snatched the mushroom skewer. She took one bite and then suddenly keeled over.

"Lina-san... my body... it's... nump...!"

Called it. She'd eaten the "clean" mushroom. I figured there was a reason the bugs weren't touching it. It was a fast-acting numbing mushroom.

"That's what you get for being greedy and not listening to me."

"S-sho... cruel..."

The numbing effect wore off by nightfall. Suddenly, the forest went quiet.

Three pairs of glowing eyes appeared in the brush. I finished my chant and waited.

When they stepped into the firelight, they matched the rumors: pale blue skin, large builds, small horns, and lifeless eyes. They looked like blue ghouls.

"Liiii-naaaa..."

"Innnnn-verrrse..."

"S-suuu..."

What kind of cry is that!? I screamed internally at the creepy, echoing voices.

"Ice Ivy!"

I slammed my hands down, and vines of ice raced across the ground, freezing the creatures solid.

"They're hideous," Miriella said, leaning in. Suddenly, one of their eyes moved.

"Watch out!" I kicked Miriella out of the way just as a clawed hand shattered the ice.

They were resistant to ice, but slow. I switched to Black Magic.

"Shade Thread!"

The creatures vanished into black dust. I didn't want to use a Fireball and burn down the forest (and my mushroom supply). Today, I was being an "eco-friendly" Lina Inverse.

But then, countless presences appeared in the dark.

"L-Lina-san! Over there!"

"Miriella, run if you want to live!"

We sprinted toward the fort, with me thin-ning out the herd with spells while Miriella screamed her head off.

We reached the fort, which was swarming with creatures. I decided to sneak in from above using Levitation. As we landed on the wall, something heavy flew at us from the dark.

"Air Shield!"

A black iron ball skidded off the wind barrier. It was a guided attack.

"Black iron balls...?"

Three balls attached by wires crawled across the tower like they were alive.

I know this weapon. It was the work of **Baron**, the elite Rehard agent.

"Looks like Baron is here."

"W-what do we do!?"

"Fireball!"

The explosion hit the "Bolas," but they emerged from the smoke unscathed. They were Golem-type weapons. I drew my short sword and charged. I couldn't cut iron, but I could cut the wires, which my Fireball had weakened. I dismantled the Bolas and tossed the pieces over the wall.

Suddenly, a massive spotlight hit me from the fort's center.

"Lina Inverse! I knew it was you!"

A high-pitched, arrogant laugh echoed.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Spiky shoulder pads, a black cloak, long black hair, and an outfit that barely qualified as clothing.

"You won't get past **Naga the White Serpent**!"

"Thanks, Naga," I said. "You just confirmed who's in charge."

"Wait, Naga-sama! Don't tell her the secrets!" Baron shouted from behind her.

Naga-sama? Since when was Baron a fanboy?

Then, the real mastermind stepped out: a man in sorcerer's robes named **Guran**.

"I am the successor to the Great Diol!"

I remembered Diol—a pervert who tried to turn me into a chimera and once mass-produced clones of Naga.

"I used your hair to create a host for my chimeras, Lina Inverse!" Guran boasted. "But the clone turned out to be a man! I realized it was a trap by Diol, so I've been brainwashing these creatures to 'remember their true form' by chanting your name!"

That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I gave Miriella a signal. She'd sneaked in while we were talking, though Baron caught her immediately.

"Too bad," I said. "Fire Arrow!"

I didn't aim for them. I aimed for the bag Miriella "dropped"—filled with the "suicide" explosives Melody gave her.

BOOM! The chain reaction leveled a section of the fort. I followed up with Fireballs.

Baron saved Miriella from the blast, proving he was way too much of a gentleman for a spy. I tied him and Naga up, but Guran was gone.

"Melody, I know you're there," I called out.

The plain-faced agent appeared from a tower. "Impressive, Lina-san."

"Is the job done?"

"Almost. Our other agents are catching Guran in the tunnels."

But then, a low, earth-shaking roar filled the mountains.

"LIIII-NAAAAA... INNNN-VERRRSE..."

Fire erupted from the old mine entrance. A massive creature, the size of the fort itself, crawled out. It was a "Lina Inverse" chimera grown to gargantuan size by Guran's "growth formula." That explained the giant mushrooms and fish.

"That's not in the contract," I told Melody.

"I'll pay you fifty gold coins!" she yelled as the ground shook with every step the giant took.

"Deal!"

I took a deep breath and began the ultimate chant.

Darkness beyond blackest pitch, deeper than the red of blood... **"DRAGON SLAVE!"**

The mountain-leveling blast vaporized the giant.

Mission accomplished.

I spent my reward eating as much *Migi-take* as I could before leaving Selenius.

Though, travelers say that on moonless nights, you can still hear a faint voice in the ruins… *"Liiii-naaaa..."*

Lina Inverse Extermination: The End

The Fake-Love War of The Sorcerer's Ruins:

Deep in the mountains, roughly halfway between Seirune and Zephilia, a pair of travelers stopped in a dim forest. The girl, a beautiful young mage with long chestnut hair and a fierce gaze, adjusted her black cloak and spoke up.

"So... is this the place? ...Hey, Zelgadis?"

The man she addressed was clad in a white coat and tunic, his face mostly hidden by a hood and mask. He gave a small nod.

"Yeah, Lina. No mistake. This is the ruin... and in here..."

Zelgadis looked toward a moss-covered, ancient structure. He pulled down his mask to reveal a handsome young man with silver hair—but his skin was composed of hard, blue-grey rock. He was a **Chimera**, a fusion of a human, a rock golem, and a blow demon. His lifelong quest was to find a way to return to his human form.

Supposedly, the cure lay within these ruins—the former research facility of a "legendary sorcerer." Lina, however, sounded skeptical.

"You said this guy spent decades researching magic amplification, right? And that his 'Legacy' might rival the Philosopher's Stone... are you sure this info is legit?"

"The source is Prince Philionel of Seirune. It’s reliable."

"Ah, Amelia’s dad... well, he’s not the type to tell weird lies." Lina sighed, picturing the boisterous, muscle-bound royal.

Zelgadis turned the question back to her. "But is it really okay to leave Gourry behind? He looked... unwell when we saw him earlier."

Lina’s face darkened with tragic gravity. "Gourry... Gourry is...!"

"What happened!? Did he face a dragon!?"

"He ate too much... and got a stomachache!"

"Are you kidding me!?"

"Hey, don't look at me. He probably just picked up something off the side of the road and ate it."

"You're surprisingly harsh on him. But fine—let's leave that jellyfish-brain who called me 'Zedilgas' aside for now."

(He's still holding a grudge,) Lina thought.

Zelgadis grew serious again. "They say this ruin is protected by a powerful barrier. Seirune's research teams were blown away just trying to get near the entrance. Clearing this won't be easy."

Lina puffed out her chest confidently. "Perfect! The harder the path, the better the treasure sleeping inside. I'm getting pumped!"

"Heh. True. If a national research team couldn't get in, no bandits have touched the loot either. I made the right choice asking for your help."

"Darn right. But remember, the treasure is my fee. You get the 'Sorcerer's Legacy' to fix your body, and I get everything else."

They shared a look of mutual interest and steeled their wills.

"Let's go!"

"Bring on the barriers and traps!"

...But the moment they stepped forward together, a weak *pffft* sound echoed.

" "...Huh?" "

They blinked at each other.

"Lina... that felt like..."

"Yeah... did we just... walk right through the barrier?"

"You've got to be kidding. I didn't feel a speck of mana. Was the barrier just... weak?"

"Maybe it’s the type that deactivates if certain conditions are met? Otherwise, the caster couldn't get back in."

"But what condition could we have met? We just walked toward the door—"

『If you wish to know the answer... I shall tell you...』

"Yeah, please. ...Wait, WHO!?"

Zelgadis jumped back as a wizened voice echoed from a translucent old man in a grey robe standing by the entrance. A ghost—or rather, a lingering thought-projection of the sorcerer.

"A ghost? Is that the sorcerer?"

"Looks like it," Lina said, unimpressed. "Do all sorcerers have a rule about dressing like that?"

The ghost ignored her. 『The condition to pass the barrier is for **a man and a woman** to step into my facility at the same time. Bandits and research teams always came in groups of men or large parties, and were repelled...』

"I see," Zelgadis realized. "No one would be reckless enough to come here with such a small group."

『Indeed... and you have come seeking my life's work. I can feel the immense mana radiating from you... but even in death, I cannot simply hand it over.』

"Wait!" Zelgadis pleaded. "I have a reason I can't back down! Please, give me your research—"

『Therefore—I shall grant it only to those who overcome my **Trial**!』

"A trial? What kind of trial?"

The ghost paused for dramatic effect. 『I left society as a young man, abandoning my family to live in solitude. I spent my entire life on research... but in my final years, I realized I had one **regret**. I want you to erase it. That regret is...!』

"That regret is... what!?"

The ghost pointed at them and shouted:

『**I WANT TO SEE A YOUNG COUPLE ACTING ALL LOVEY-DOVEY!**』

"I see! So it's— ...Wait, what?" Zelgadis froze.

Lina looked just as stunned. "A couple?" "Me and Zel?"

The ghost continued, oblivious. 『I realized too late that Love is the ultimate truth! I want you to fulfill my lingering desire. From here on, you shall face trials that test you as a *couple*. Only those who prove their bond shall receive my legacy... So, I'll leave the rest to you two lovebirds!』

"Is this a matchmaking service!?" Zelgadis yelled. "You're giving away your life's work for *that*!? And why did your personality suddenly change!?"

『Hey, those couples you see in town... flirting in public... for a shy guy like me who can't even make eye contact, it's like magic! I'm so jealous!』

"Are you going through puberty!?"

Lina, meanwhile, began chanting. "Source of all power... crimson fire... gather in my hand..."

"Wait, Lina, don't—!"

"I don't have time for this! **FIREBALL!**"

The flame roared toward the ruin's door—but as it flew, it seemed to be *sucked* into the walls and ceiling. By the time it hit the door, it was no bigger than a candle flame.

"What? Was that a *Spell Negation*?"

"No," Lina whispered. "It wasn't negated... it was *absorbed* by the ruin itself."

Hope flared in Zelgadis. If the ruin could absorb Lina's magic that easily, the "Legacy" really was powerful.

『So, young ones... do you have the resolve to face my Trials?』

"And the trial is... that 'lovey-dovey' stuff you mentioned? Look, you've got it wrong,

we—"

Lina suddenly grabbed Zelgadis by the neck in a headlock and whispered, "Zel! Don't be so honest! If we get kicked out now, you'll never fix your body! Just fake it!"

"F-fake being a couple!?"

"We've survived everything else, we can survive a little acting! Right!?"

Zelgadis groaned. "I never dreamed I'd face a 'difficulty' quite like this... but fine."

『Well?』 the ghost prodded. 『Will you show me your passion? Will your hearts explode with the heat of a thousand suns!?』

(...God, he's annoying,) they both thought.

Finally, they turned to the ghost, forced a stiff smile, and joined hands.

"O-of course, darling! We're the most passionate couple ever! Right, **Darling**? ♡"

"Y-yeah... you said it, **Honey**."

" "Hahaha... ha..." "

As they stepped into the ruins, their cramped smiles and dry laughter suggested that the road ahead would be very long indeed.

Zelgadis and Lina advanced through the ruins after clearing the "Trial of Phantom Hallucinations," but a heavy, awkward silence hung between them. Lina stomped ahead, huffing irritably, looking so moody that Zelgadis hesitated to even speak to her.

However, things couldn't stay like this. Besides, there was something he needed to say. Steeling his resolve, Zelgadis finally spoke.

"...Hey, Lina. Got a second?"

"Oh? What is it, Mr. Broody Pervert?"

"Stop dragging that joke out! ...N-no, that’s not it."

Zelgadis cleared his throat and regained his composure.

"...I’m sorry for dragging you into this weird mess. I didn't have the slightest clue such

an idiotic 'trial' was waiting for us... but the truth is, without you, I wouldn't have even made it this far. So, what I’m trying to say is... I'm sorry."

As Zelgadis offered his sincere apology, the previously moody Lina—

"...Pfft! I thought you were making such a serious face for something important, and then... Hahaha!"

"...Eh? Hey, Lina?"

Zelgadis was bewildered by her sudden outburst, but Lina continued through her laughter.

"Hehe... Honestly, you’re as stiff and serious as ever. For a 'Broody Pervert,' anyway."

"I told you... that was a misunderstanding—"

"It’s fine. I’m only here for the treasure anyway, so we’re even... right, Zel?"

"! O-oh..."

Finally being called by his name instead of a nickname, Zelgadis felt a small sense of relief. But Lina wasn't finished.

"...But, if I have one complaint."

"? ...A complaint?"

As he looked back at her, she thrust a finger right under his nose.

"In times like this, you don't say 'I'm sorry.' You say 'Thank you!' You're so tactless, honestly!"

"! ...Lina..."

Zelgadis winced, realizing she was right. Even if her goal was treasure, she had stuck with him faithfully, despite all her grumbling.

"Honestly, being so formal with me is a point deduction. We've known each other forever... though I can't deny it’s a bit of a cursed fate... but between comrades, you don't act like that—"

As Lina continued her lecture, Zelgadis allowed a small smile to touch his lips and cut

in.

"Thank you—Lina."

"! ...Hmph, exactly. Much better! ♪"

Lina responded with a delighted grin. Even in the dimly lit corridor, their footsteps felt lighter.

They shared a laugh and prepared to move forward—but then:

『—How wonderful! The bond between a man and woman who trust each other... I can't stand how good this feels! This... THIS is what I wanted to see! Hyah-hoo!』

"Every time this guy pops up, I seriously want to go home," Lina muttered.

"L-Lina, don't say that... though I agree with you completely."

Their light footsteps instantly felt like they were made of lead again. However, they soon reached a new obstacle.

"...Hm? Is that... the next door?"

Just as Zelgadis spotted the door, Lina reached out cautiously, sensing another trick.

"Hnngh! ...Yeah, it won't budge. I have a bad feeling about this, which means..."

『Correct—the next Trial begins. I see you're getting into the flow of things. Impressive, impressive...』

"I didn't want to get into this flow! Ugh... if I could just use my magic, I'd vaporize you in a second..."

Lina sighed, and Zelgadis felt a fresh wave of guilt, but she turned back to the spirit of the sorcerer.

"So, what do we have to do next? Don't tell me... you're going to tell us to kiss? If so, what do you think a maiden's lips are—"

『Wha—!? K-kissing!? How scandalous! That's skipping way ahead! I can't believe it... kids these days...』

(He's safe,) Zelgadis thought.

Despite his bizarre demands, the sorcerer was as innocent as a middle-schooler. It made the situation awkward, but it was better than a truly extreme demand. The sorcerer cleared his spectral throat and spoke with newfound gravity.

『Now... young ones, you have done well to overcome my harsh Trials.』

(Harsh in a different sense...) Zelgadis thought.

『Regrettably, the next Trial is the last. Once you overcome this, I shall grant you my greatest research: the Legacy.』

"Finally, it's over! ...Wait, really!?" Zelgadis blurted out.

He and Lina exchanged a look. The sorcerer continued solemnly.

『I have seen your bond. Even when faced with the terrifying Golem—cough, cough—I mean, the ghost, you did not abandon your partner. Even when forced into a banquet of sweet humiliation, you did not turn away. Even under the temptation of the Phantom Hallucinations, your hearts did not waver.』

((That's because they were all so underwhelming...)) they both thought.

『But for the finale—I want a giant firework to go off! Now, right here—!』

The spirit pointed at them dramatically.

『I demand a **"Confession Battle"**—tell each other what you like about one another!』

" "...Hah?" "

The two stood stunned by the absurdity.

" "Wha... WHAAAAAT!? A confession!?" "

They immediately turned their backs to the sorcerer and began whispering frantically.

"L-Lina! A confession? What am I supposed to do!?"

"Don't start talking like Gourry! A confession is a confession!"

"But I have almost no experience with this! Lina, have you ever confessed to someone?"

"As if! I'm a super-pure, delicate maiden! I've been confessed to a billion times, but

I've never done the asking! If you want a confession from me, bring me a whole kingdom first!"

"Your self-esteem is as terrifying as ever! But this is no time for jokes... we aren't even a couple! How are we supposed to tell each other what we like? Can we fake it...!?"

『Hey, kids, what's wrong? I know you want to flirt, but let me see! Hellooo?』

"O-hoho! Of course, Grandfather! Just give us a moment, okay?" Lina called out in a fake, high-pitched voice.

"H-haha, what a troublesome Mademoiselle! But that's what makes her cute, right? S'il vous plaît?"

『What happened to you two? Your characters are breaking! Even I can tell!』

The sorcerer grew impatient.

『Hurry, hurry! Let me see your embarrassing, heart-pounding confession battle!』

"Ugh... he's so annoying!" Zelgadis hissed.

"Fine! If it has to happen, let's just get it over with! Go on, Zel! Pour your heart out to the Genius Beautiful Sorceress Lina Inverse! You're lucky it's so easy for you!"

"Hey, you're just pushing your turn back! Dammit... something I like... hmmm..."

Zelgadis thought of her greed and her violence, but seeing Lina's predatory eyes, he pushed the insults down and began to speak.

"U-uh... well... you're good at magic... and you're decent with a sword... To be honest, you're stronger than dragons or demons... you're a thousand times more reliable than most men..."

"Hey, Zel. Not that. More like... you know? Don't make me angry! Mention my incredible looks—"

"L-looks? Your looks... ....."

Zelgadis looked at her seriously. He was famously earnest.

"Your face... isn't bad. Actually... I think... you're quite cute."

"...Oh..."

Lina let out a small, surprised sound. She didn't seem to hate the compliment. Zelgadis, however, was dying of embarrassment.

"What is this!? This is too embarrassing! Why do I have to say this to your face!? And why in front of this pervert sorcerer!? Aaargh!"

『Hehe, don't stop now! Just go for it! Just confess already!』

"YOU! Just you wait! Once I get that Legacy, I'm burning your study to the ground! You and your adult books are going up in flames!"

『I'm sorry, please don't!』

"Are your porn mags that important to you!?"

Zelgadis turned back to Lina to finish the Trial.

"So... we've been together a long time... we've traveled, we've faced danger... I rely on you. So... that part of you..."

"...Yeah... yeah?"

"I... I think I... l-like you! There! That's it! Finished!"

His skin, normally blue-grey, turned a deep shade of red as he turned away. Lina rubbed her cheek, a small smile on her face, and patted his shoulder.

"Not bad."

"Why are you acting so superior!?"

"Well... seeing Zel act all 'dere-dere' was worth the stupid trial. It’s 'Dere-Zel,' haha."

"Don't give me weird nicknames!"

"Anyway, calm down. Since you did your best, I'll give you a grand response. Be grateful! Hmph!"

Lina stood tall and declared:

"Witness the romantic techniques of the Genius Beautiful Sorceress—the girl even the Demon King couldn't ignore!"

"I thought you were a delicate maiden?"

"I'm a popular, delicate maiden! I get hit on all the time in town! I'll handle this situation perfectly!"

Lina cleared her throat and looked Zelgadis in the eyes with uncharacteristic seriousness.

"...Zel. It's embarrassing to say this again, but... we've adventured and fought together. We've argued, sure... but when all is said and done, I don't dislike you."

"L-Lina? Why so sudden?"

"Just listen. ...Right, Zel?"

She looked down shyly. Zelgadis was stunned.

"You've saved me so many times... you always show up at the perfect moment to take the credit... but how do I put it? I really do think you're reliable. I really... think that about you... about Zel..."

"Lina..."

Her tone was so sincere that Zelgadis was overwhelmed. Her voice reached a fever pitch.

"I... I'll never forget you! I'll never forget youuuu!"

"Am I dying?"

Zelgadis's dry remark broke the spell. Lina, fully committed to her "act," started dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Ah... he was such a reliable, good guy... and yet, to think... that such a thing would happen to him..."

"Hey, tell me what happened to me. I'm going to lose sleep tonight wondering how I died."

"Zel... you overdid it... but don't worry, I'll remember you sometimes. So, rest in

peace... sob..."

"I'm standing right here. Hey, Lina. Miss Lina?"

She was too deep in her own world to hear him. The sorcerer, however...

『S-sob... what a beautiful story! Even after her partner's death, she lives on with his memory... Is this... is this the 'Young Widow' trope I've heard about!? I LOVE IT!』

"I'm not dead! And you'll fall for anything, won't you?"

"Honestly," Lina said, suddenly snapping back to normal, "thinking too hard just makes you lose out. Right, Zel?"

"Oh, welcome back, Lina. I'm exhausted..."

As Zelgadis sighed, the door finally creaked open.

They finally reached the heart of the ruins. The room was filled with treasure—not gold and silver, but magical talismans, rubies, and emeralds meant for amplifying power.

But Zelgadis was staring at the center of the room. A massive pentagram glowed with immense magical energy.

『This is my life's work,』 the spirit's voice vibrated. 『A device that collects magic from the facility. That is why your spells were absorbed earlier.』

"So much magic..." Zelgadis whispered. "It really might rival the Philosopher's Stone."

『Indeed. But it takes time to gather. You can only use this much power once. Think carefully.』

"I've already decided. And... I know I've complained, but... thank you. For giving us your research."

『...Hmph. Actually, I want you to use it. I spent my life alone in research. I thought I wanted to see the passion of a young couple... but maybe... I just wanted to talk to someone. To fill the void of loneliness.』

Zelgadis felt a pang of sympathy. But the sorcerer smiled.

『Go on, young man. Take it. It's what you wanted.』

"Zel," Lina said, patting his back. "Finally, your wish comes true."

"Lina... I hope so."

"Hey, don't get cold feet now! You're a pretty good-looking guy as you are, but I guess I'll be a bit sad to see this version of you go~"

"Heh... shut up. Here goes."

Zelgadis stepped into the circle. With this magic, he could return his chimera body to its human form. But then—

He stopped.

"Zel? What's wrong?"

Suddenly, the ground shook. A heavy rumbling filled the air, and the sorcerer began to cackle.

『Pffft... Hahaha!』

"What's so funny!?" Lina yelled.

Then, she realized. *It was a trap*. The trials were too easy. Why would he give away his life's work for so little? He wanted company for his journey to the afterlife!

"You sadistic, pervert sorcerer!"

『Crap...』 the sorcerer's voice wavered. 『I forgot... if anyone gets too close to the magic circle... the facility self-destructs. My bad! ☆』

"You sadistic, pervert, **clumsy** sorcerer!"

『Hey, I'm a spirit, I forget things! I think there was a cancel code, but I forgot that too... tehe-pero! ☆ Anyway, I'm satisfied after seeing you two flirt. I'm going to pass on now. Bye!』

"DON'T YOU DARE! GET BACK HERE!"

『I believe in you guys... we're Best Friends Forever...!』

"WE ARE MORTAL ENEMIES!"

The spirit vanished with a satisfied smile. The ruins began to crumble.

"Lina! Calm down!" Zelgadis shouted over her panic. "There's only one way out of this."

He pointed to the magic circle.

"The magic gathered here... Lina, you use it."

"But Zel! You came all this way to fix your body!"

"It's fine. If we die here, it doesn't matter what I look like. Do it, Lina!"

Lina stepped into the circle and began the incantation.

"Darkness beyond twilight, crimson beyond blood that flows..."

The magic of the *Dragon Slave*—boosted by the ruins' energy—was unleashed.

"DRAGON SLAVE!!"

A pillar of light blasted through the ceiling, obliterating the falling debris and the ruins themselves.

Zelgadis sat on a pile of rubble. The ruins were gone. His chance was gone.

"Zel... you realized it, didn't you?" Lina said quietly. "That magic... it wasn't enough to turn you back."

"Yeah. I knew the moment I stepped in."

"I figured it out too. It was a lot of power, but nowhere near the Philosopher's Stone."

Zelgadis looked up and smiled. "Well, considering who that sorcerer was, it's not surprising. I'll just look for another way. Business as usual."

Lina knew he was acting tough. But she also knew he wouldn't give up. She grinned

and slung an arm around his shoulder.

"Alright! Let's throw a 'Too Bad' party for Zel! My treat!"

"What!? Lina... is treating? Are there side effects to the magic? Is the world ending?"

"How rude! ...Though, I do have a reason."

She pulled back her cloak to reveal bags full of the talismans and jewels she had swiped while Zelgadis was talking to the spirit.

"I was busy working while you were chatting. Don't underestimate Lina Inverse!"

Zelgadis laughed. "You really never miss an opportunity."

"Zel," Lina said, her voice turning serious for a moment. "We'll find a way. I'll help you find the next lead... as long as there's a reward! ♪"

Zelgadis realized his gloom had vanished.

"Come on, Zel! Let's go eat!"

"Heh... fine. I'll let you treat me."

As he followed her down the mountain path, he watched her skip ahead.

(You really do help me out, Lina... Thank you.)

The Fake-Love War of the Sorcerous Ruins: The End

Hellmaster Phibrizzo’s "World-Destruction” Meeting

In a space of total darkness, a small boy sitting at a round table spoke up.

He had black hair tickling his shoulders and an adorable face that could easily be mistaken for a girl’s. He was a beautiful youth with a complexion so rosy that anyone he spoke to would likely break into a smile.

However, the three figures currently present only furrowed their brows in suspicion.

"...Hellmaster. I have a question or two I’d like to ask."

The tall woman sitting to Phibrizzo’s left spoke while crossing her arms. She had unruly blonde hair and a physique rippling with supple muscle. The majesty and wild aura radiating from her whole body was reminiscent of a lion.

"Hm? What is it, Xelas?"

"Where on earth are we? Don’t tell me this is some kind of dream."

As she spoke, the woman—**Beast Master Xelas Metallium**—looked around. But all she saw was a darkness that stretched as far as the eye could see, with no end in sight.

"Actually—"

Following her lead, a slender, black-haired woman sitting to Phibrizzo’s right placed a finger on her chin.

Deep Sea Dolphin. Like Phibrizzo and Xelas, she was one of the high-ranking Mazoku (demons) who served as the lieutenants of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu.

"Why are you alive, Hellmaster? I was under the impression that you were erased quite some time ago."

Dolphin blinked her dark eyes in curiosity.

Phibrizzo gave a small laugh and shrugged at their words.

"I see, your doubts are perfectly reasonable. To put it simply—it’s not that I’ve come back to life. No matter how much I can 'see' the cycle of reincarnation, I can't exactly resurrect myself."

"Then, who exactly are we speaking to right now—"

"You should listen until the end, Dolphin," Phibrizzo said, raising a finger to cut her off.

"—It’s true that back then, I was erased from existence by *'That Person.'* However, perhaps due to the influence of *'That Person's'* power, my consciousness remained 'here.' The reason I can talk to you now is simple. I summoned only your consciousnesses 'here.'"

"……"

At Phibrizzo’s words, Xelas and Dolphin fell silent. It seemed they were weighing the truth of his statement—or perhaps they had realized exactly where 'here' was.

Phibrizzo curled the corner of his lip into a grin.

"It looks like you’ve already figured it out. Yes—this is the place you call the Sea of Chaos. Its other name is..."

"The Afterword."

『……Huh?』

The voices of Xelas and Dolphin harmonized perfectly in response.

"Uh... could you say that one more time, Hellmaster?"

"I said, this is the Sea of Chaos—"

"No, the part after that. The 'other name.'"

"The Afterword."

"That. What exactly is that?" Xelas asked, looking utterly bewildered. Phibrizzo laughed.

"You don't need to worry so much. Even though it's called the Afterword, we're at the very edge of it. As proof, look—there's still descriptive prose here, isn't there?"

"Descriptive prose?! What on earth is 'descriptive prose'!?"

Dolphin screamed, sweat beads forming on her forehead. For the record, "descriptive prose" refers to the text outside of dialogue—in other words, *this*.

"Well, don't sweat the small stuff. Oh, by the way, I'm not called Hellmaster here; I'm referred to as '**Underling-of-an-Underling F.**'"

"Underling-of-an-Underling F!?"

"Yeah, so be careful not to wander too deep. In our original world, I was called the Hellmaster, but here, I'm the lowest of the low. If you get stuck in the deep end, I won't be able to save you."

"T-The deep end... you mean there's more beyond this?"

"Yeah. Over that way, the Great Demon King Ruby-Eye wears a hand-stitched gold-lame tuxedo."

"A gold-lame tuxedo!?"

"And sometimes he turns into a snowman."

"A snowman!?"

"And occasionally he gets beaten with a bottle of Oolong tea."

"Oolong tea!? ...Wait, what even is Oolong tea!?"

"Oh, you don't know? It's a Chinese tea made from semi-fermented leaves..."

"What in the world is 'China'—!?"

Dolphin shrieked. It was a level of agitation unbecoming of a high-ranking Mazoku, but quite understandable. Phibrizzo nodded with deep emotion.

"I understand. I was the same way when I first got here. But eventually, you realize... thinking about it is just a waste of time."

"……"

At Phibrizzo’s enlightened tone, Xelas made a sour face but shook her head. Though she didn't fully grasp the situation, she likely judged that agitation and confusion could be fatal for a Mazoku, who are spiritual beings.

"At... At any rate. Let us move the conversation along. Assuming your story is true, why did you summon us here?"

"To talk, of course."

"Talk...?"

"Yes. Even though I’m already deceased, I am Mazoku. My desire to bring an orderly destruction to the world remains unchanged. So, as the former leader of the five lieutenants, I thought I’d offer some advice to those of you who are still alive."

"I... I see..."

Xelas nodded as if forcing herself to be convinced. Rather, she seemed relieved that Phibrizzo was finally saying something she could understand.

"...And your real reason?"

"To be blunt, I have nothing to do, so I wanted someone to talk to."

"...Hey."

"Hmph."

Under the half-lidded glares of Xelas and Dolphin, Phibrizzo’s shoulders shook.

"Hehe... to catch me in a leading question, you’ve certainly improved, Xelas."

"No, a leading question...?"

As Xelas scratched her cheek, Dolphin—who had finally caught her breath—shrugged.

"W-Well, isn't it fine? It seems certain that he intends to grant us his wisdom."

"Hmph... well, I suppose."

As Xelas nodded reluctantly, Phibrizzo broke into a satisfied smile.

"—Then, once again: Welcome, Beast Master Xelas Metallium. Deep Sea Dolphin.

Greater Beast Grausherra."

"……!"

The moment Phibrizzo said that, a man in armor sitting across the round table made his chair rattle. It was as if he had been startled by his name being called suddenly.

"...Grausherra."

Xelas glared at him.

"You were sleeping just now, weren't you?"

"I was not sleeping."

"Why lie?"

"I am not lying."

"Then tell us where we are."

"……"

After looking around the area, Grausherra made his chair rattle again.

"Ha... Why is the Hellmaster here!?"

『……』

Xelas and Dolphin looked at Grausherra with judgmental eyes. But Phibrizzo didn't seem offended; he laughed cheerfully.

"Ahahaha! It seems he has acclimated to this place faster than anyone."

"...What do you mean by that?"

Phibrizzo only laughed again at Xelas’s question and turned back to the table to return to the subject.

"Anyway, let’s begin. In order to bring an orderly destruction to the world—"

But once again, Phibrizzo was interrupted.

This time, however, it wasn't Grausherra's fault.

"—Hey now, looks like you guys are doing something interesting."

A deep, husky voice echoed from somewhere.

"Wha..."

Xelas, the first to realize who the voice belonged to, let out a small gasp.

It was only natural. After all, the owner of that voice—much like Phibrizzo—was supposed to be an existence that had already vanished from the world.

"...Gaav."

Phibrizzo, who had been wearing a bright expression until now, spoke with a grimace. In response, a large man wearing an ivory-colored coat stepped out of the darkness.

"Yo, Phibrizzo. Having a class reunion without me? You're as mean-spirited as ever."

He showed a wild grin, his hair as red as flame swaying.

There was no one present who didn't know his name. **Chaos Dragon Gaav.** The former lieutenant of the Demon King who had once turned traitor against the Mazoku and was struck down by the Hellmaster.

"Gaav! Even you are here!?"

As Xelas cried out, Gaav gave a snort.

"Yeah. Don't know what twist of fate it is. Regardless, it’s been a hell of a long time. Uh..."

Gaav furrowed his brows and stared at Xelas.

"...Sorry, who were you again?"

"It’s Xelas! Xelas Metallium! ...Even if you are a traitor, what is the meaning of forgetting the face of a comrade you once fought alongside!"

At Xelas’s words, Gaav’s eyes widened.

"Beast Master!? Wait a sec, hey—wasn't Xelas more, like, long-haired and slender, and didn't she smoke a pipe!?"

"That’s the **anime version**!"

"Eh? Then was she a wolf-like thing in winged armor—"

"That’s the **SFC (Super Famicom) game version**!!"

"...Xelas, Xelas."

As Xelas shouted, Dolphin called out to her.

"What? I’m busy dealing with this insolent—"

"No, it’s not that... 'Anime'? 'SFC'? What on earth have you been talking about for the last few seconds...?"

"Wha...!?"

Xelas’s face twisted in horror at Dolphin’s words.

"W-What...? What did I just blurt out?"

As Xelas’s hands trembled, Gaav clapped his hands as if he’d realized something.

"Ah, so that means you must be Dolphin?"

"Of course I am."

"Ah, my bad, my bad. When I think of the Beast Master and Deep Sea pairing, I usually just picture a cat with a fish in its mouth."

"That was—!"

"From the **New Year’s cards**!"

"H...!" Zelas and Dolphin cried out in unison, then choked on their breaths at the same time. Both looked as if they couldn't believe the words that had just come out of their own mouths.

"Ah, looks like you’ve both started to succumb to the 'poison' of this place. Careful now. You won't be able to go back," Gaav said nonchalantly. He shifted his gaze from

the flustered Zelas and Dolphin to the man in armor.

As if on cue, the armored man lifted his chin. "Surely you won't claim to have forgotten me as well."

"Hah, don't worry. I was just feeling relieved to finally see a familiar face. It’s been a while, uh... Hot-Blooded Strongest Go-Saurer?"

"Who is that!?" Grausherra shouted, unable to contain himself.

"Ah, sorry. ...Was it Genki Bakuhatsu Ganbaruger?"

"My name is **Dynast Grausherra!**"

"Right, right. Absolute Dynast Grausherra."

"Why are you adding 'Absolute'!?"

"My bad, my bad. I just remembered it sounded like something out of the *Eldoran* series," Gaav laughed, looking far less apologetic than his words suggested. Grausherra exhaled in indignation.

"...Honestly, there is a limit to such rudeness."

"Oh, forgive me. Haha, anyway, doesn't 'Absolute Dynast Grausherra' sound cooler?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What kind of naming sense is that?"

"Huh?" At Grausherra’s words, Gaav’s expression suddenly flipped.

"What? Did I offend you? Hmph, in the first place, it's your fault for getting my name wrong."

"No. It’s not that. I’ll admit I was wrong about that part." Gaav looked down and shook his head. "—It’s just. Just this. Grausherra, I will **not** sit here and take a lecture on naming sense from *you*!"

"W-what?" Grausherra’s face colored with confusion at the unexpected outburst.

However, Phibrizzo, Zelas, and Dolphin, who were listening, all nodded in realization. *"Ah..."*

"Hey, what’s with the 'Ah'?"

"Well... I mean..." "Indeed..." "It is true, isn't it..." The three looked at each other, trailing off. Grausherra knit his brows deeply, clearly lost. Seeing this, Gaav shrugged.

"Grausherra, list off the names of your Dynast Generals and Dynast High Priests. All of them."

(Generals and High Priests were high-ranking Mazoku created by the Dark Lords' lieutenants as their own subordinates. Naturally, those lieutenants—the lords themselves—named them.)

"What...? Why should I do that?" "Just do it." "..., Dynast General Sherra, Dynast General North, Dynast High Priest Dee, uh... and Dynast High Priest Gru... Grou...?"

Grausherra furrowed his brow in concentration. The other lieutenants broke into a cold sweat. "Don't tell me you don't remember..." "The names of your own subordinates? You must be joking..."

"Well, either way!" Gaav shouted, looking exasperated. "...Dynast Grausherra's subordinates are Dee, North, Gru (tentative), and Sherra... are you mocking us!? That's beyond lazy! (Note: Combined, the names sound like 'Dynast' in Japanese: Di-No-Su-To)."

"Wh...! It shouldn't matter! Don't poke your nose into another's camp!"

"Shut up! How can you talk about naming sense with names like that! What is that? A combination? Are they going to merge!? You 'DX Four-Unit Combination Absolute Dynast Grausherra'!"

"You—! Are you still going!? If you're going to say that, what about the Beast Master's Beast Priest!?" Grausherra shouted, pointing at Zelas.

Indeed, Zelas's subordinate was named Xellos. Grausherra's point wasn't entirely unfounded. However, Zelas didn't look flustered at all; she calmly crossed her legs.

"My confidant is Xellos alone. He is a clone I created with my heart and soul. What is strange about giving him a part of my own name?" Zelas said. Grausherra nodded as if he had found an ally.

"See? There's nothing strange about it."

"No, no, no, no. Isn't that different?" It wasn't Gaav who shook his head, but Dolphin.

"What? How is it different?"

"Because, when Sherra-chan asked you about the origin of her name, didn't you say, 'Why should I care about the name of a mere tool?' She was quite shocked. That was awful—even for a Mazoku, it was a total turn-off."

Dolphin spoke with a sour face. Grausherra choked for a moment and then awkwardly averted his eyes. "Fool. How could I tell her the origin of her name to her face?" "Why?" "……It's embarrassing."

As he spoke, Grausherra's cheeks flushed a light pink. The four other Mazoku's faces turned pale with horror instead.

"Eeeeeh..." "Ugh, gross. Is this old man a *tsundere*?" "And for someone saying that, he was pretty vague about one of his Priest's names..." "Poor Sherra... to be born under an old man like this."

"S-shut up! It's none of your business! Anyway, Phibrizzo-dono! if we are to have a meeting, let's get on with it!" Grausherra shouted, turning his face away. It seemed that even while dozing, he had heard that a meeting was to take place. Phibrizzo, wearing a dry smile, straightened his posture and faced the round table.

"...Right. Let's begin. I'd feel bad for taking up too much of everyone's time." "Y-yes." "Understood." Following Phibrizzo's lead, Zelas and Dolphin also sat back in their chairs.

"Hup." Gaav followed suit and took an empty seat. Phibrizzo glared at him. "What do you think you're doing, Gaav? This isn't a place for you."

"Hah, don't be so stiff. We're all dead anyway; let's forget the ties of our past lives. I'm technically still a Dark Lord's lieutenant, aren't I? I'll at least offer some advice to my former comrades." "You, who mixed with humans and raised the flag of rebellion against us?" "Haha, didn't you know? Humans are fickle." "……"

Phibrizzo was silent for a few moments after Gaav spoke, then snorted. "Fine. But if you get in the way, I'll make sure you disappear for eternity this time." "Ooh, Hellmaster-sama is as scary as ever," Gaav shrugged mockingly. Phibrizzo ignored him and looked toward the others.

"Despite the unexpected interruption, let's begin. —What is necessary for us to destroy our world?"

As Phibrizzo spoke, Grausherra cleared his throat to regain his composure before replying. "Regarding that, it is quite obvious. First and foremost, we must find the remaining humans who host the Ruby-Eye Dark Lord as soon as possible." He spoke as if making a declaration, clenching his fist firmly.

Their master, the Dark Lord Shabranigdo, had been split into seven during the War of the Resurrection five thousand years ago and sealed within different humans. Reviving him was the self-evident top priority for the Mazoku. However, Dolphin shrugged at his words.

"That may be true, but being mixed with humans is a more troublesome problem than expected. —We have a bad example right there, after all." She spoke sarcastically, glancing at Gaav. Gaav gave a small snort.

"True. If the host human is some crazy bastard, they might use the Dark Lord's power however they want. Doing dine-and-dashes at blinding speeds, peeping into women's baths from the astral side, or threatening villagers to demand two cabbages and some pork as a sacrifice."

"Don't use the Dark Lord's power for such trivial things!" Dolphin shouted, unable to help herself. "A-anyway, if the ego of the host human is too strong, it's not guaranteed they will wield the power as we wish. There was even that time when the Dark Lord himself desired destruction..."

"...I won't let you say you aren't responsible for that incident," Grausherra glared at Dolphin and Zelas indignantly. In fact, he had previously found a human hosting the Dark Lord, only for it to be destroyed by the hand of a certain human. "Even though I found one of the seven fragments of Ruby-Eye, you two were foolishly honest enough to lead those humans right to him—"

But Zelas didn't seem to care and exhaled through her nose. "We are Mazoku. We did what the Dark Lord desired. What complaint could you have with that?" "Hehe, besides, it's hard to know how to react when you brag about a method that relied so much on pure coincidence." "What was that, you two!?" Grausherra's voice sharpened, and he leaned forward with a clatter of his armor.

It was a touch-and-go situation. A murderous intent that could make an ordinary person faint swirled between the three.

"Now, calm down," Phibrizzo's voice rang out clearly, restoring order to the fraying atmosphere. "It's true that the revival of Ruby-Eye is our long-cherished wish.

Continue the search for the host humans as before. —But there are things we can do at the same time, aren't there?"

"Things we can do?" Dolphin tilted her head, a finger to her chin. Phibrizzo nodded. "Yes. If Ruby-Eye is revived, there's a possibility that a full-scale battle with the remaining clones of the Flare Dragon will begin, just like the War of the Fall a thousand years ago. In that case, isn't it important to prepare the 'stage' for it?"

"In other words—you want us to weaken the enemy's power now?" Zelas said. Phibrizzo narrowed his eyes with satisfaction. "Exactly. Even with the Water Dragon King gone, there are still those in the world who inherit the power of the other clones or the gods, and temples that worship the Flare Dragon. Don't you find them... a bit of an eyesore?"

Phibrizzo's face twisted into a smile, and the three lieutenants nodded in response. "I see." "That is certainly true." "Understood. We shall hunt down every fool who serves the gods."

"Hmm..." Gaav, who had been listening while leaning his elbows on the table, looked around at everyone's faces with half-closed eyes. "So... in that case, who's going to handle the Knight of the Flare Dragon?"

『……』 Everyone froze for a moment at Gaav's words. The Knight of the Flare Dragon. As the name suggested, it was a knight hosting a part of the Flare Dragon's consciousness and power. Supposedly, an "inhuman human" who could beat a pure Mazoku into a pulp.

Furthermore, even if they managed to defeat the Knight, the Flare Dragon's consciousness and power would simply move into another human, and a new Knight would be born. To make matters worse, you never knew who would inherit the power, and the new Knight would have a vivid memory of the previous one being killed.

In that case, it was clear as day that the lieutenant and their camp who struck the blow would be the very first target. And if they defeated *that* one, another would appear. It was a nightmare. The ultimate "short straw."

After a brief silence, Phibrizzo shamelessly looked away. "...Well, unfortunately, I'm already dead." "Hellmaster-dono!?" "You knew all along, didn't you!?" "How cowardly, Hellmaster-dono!"

Pressed by the three, Phibrizzo slammed the table. "It can't be helped! If the next war

happens, she will undoubtedly be the biggest obstacle! Shouldn't we deal with her before the full-scale battle begins!?" "...Then why didn't you deal with it while you were alive?" "……" Phibrizzo fell silent for a moment at Dolphin's question. "My chronic 'itchy kneecap' disease was..." "Liar!" "What kind of disease is that!?" "You're a spiritual being, why are symptoms appearing on your body!?"

"S-shut uuuuuup! Anyway, defeating the Knight of the Flare Dragon is an urgent matter! Got it!?" As Phibrizzo shouted, the three exchanged glances.

"Let's take a vote. Those who think we should defeat the Knight of the Flare Dragon right now," Zelas said. Phibrizzo raised his hand. "Next, those who think it's better to defeat her *after* reviving at least one Ruby-Eye fragment." Zelas, Dolphin, and Grausherra raised their hands.

"Wh... you guys! Are you saying you won't follow my orders!?" "Well..." "Unfortunately..." "The Hellmaster is already dead after all~" "Guh...!"

Hearing them mimic his own tone, Phibrizzo made a bitter face. He sat there gritting his teeth for a while, but realized the odds were against him. He sighed in defeat. "...Fine. Then the basic policy will be the revival of the Ruby-Eye Dark Lord." 『No objections.』 Zelas, Dolphin, and Grausherra raised their hands simultaneously.

Seeing this, Gaav made a face again. "...After all that excitement, you guys are just sticking to the status quo?" Four pairs of eyes pierced Gaav at once. "...What are you trying to say, Gaav?" "I've always thought 'Chaos Dragon' and 'Dark Lord's Dragon' were confusingly similar." "What are you actually trying to say!?" Phibrizzo's voice cracked. Gaav folded his arms.

"Joking aside, if you keep discussing things in this state, you're just going in circles. Finding the Dark Lord isn't that easy. In the five thousand years since the war, only three fragments have been found, including that frozen guy in Katart. If you keep doing the same thing, you can't expect much progress. —Why don't you try adopting a new perspective?"

"A new perspective? What would that be?" Phibrizzo raised an eyebrow suspiciously. Gaav nodded confidently. "—About the *other* worlds, separate from the one we were in." "...!" Phibrizzo's brow twitched. The other three also held their breath.

—It was said that a "world" is like a plate on top of a staff thrust into the Sea of Chaos. And multiple other worlds were said to exist upon that sea. In those worlds, just like their own, Mazoku and gods fought. Among them, there might be worlds

where the Mazoku were dominant, or worlds where the gods held the initiative. If they could obtain that information, it would be strategically significant.

"The situation of other worlds, huh... for example, what kind of worlds?" Zelas asked, resting her chin on her hand with interest. Gaav nodded exaggeratedly. "Well, for instance, the world of the 'Bringer of Darkness'." "...! The 'Bringer of Darkness'!" Grausherra's eyes widened.

It was natural. Dark Star Dugradigdu. Along with their master, Shabranigdu, he was one of the representative Dark Lords of the other worlds. Hearing that name, the Mazoku at the table suddenly became excited. "So, what is happening in the world of the Bringer of Darkness?" "Oh, there are spaceships flying around." 『...Huh?』

Everyone stared blankly at Gaav's words. "Space... ships...?" "Yeah, spaceships. Personally, I think they could take 'Bodigar' and 'Galveira' and make another anime. 'Hecatoncheir' hasn't even appeared yet." "What!? What are you talking about!?" "Eh? I mean, you know, Yashi-ga—"[1] "Kyaa! Kyaaaaa! I don't know why, but I feel like I shouldn't let you say any more!" Dolphin shrieked. Gaav scratched his cheek as if he'd realized something. "Ah, sorry. That was a story from the future." "Future!? Why are you making such supernatural statements so casually!?" "Well, look, this is Chaos, and the timeline is all jumbled up." "You think you can get away with anything just by saying 'Chaos', don't you!?" "C-calm down, Dolphin," Zelas said, trying to soothe her. "...Gaav, is there no information on other worlds?" "Other worlds, huh..." Gaav, who had been talking volubly until then, paused to think. "What is it?" "No... there should be worlds like the 'King of the Blue Sky' or the 'White Mist', but the settings for those worlds are a bit unclear..." "Settings!? Did you just say 'settings'!?" Dolphin's eyes widened in shock.

But Gaav, paying no mind, groaned. "I thought the story of the world where 'Five Moons Circle (Meguru)' was coming along, but it ended before anything concrete was said. And that thing with the sea..." "...Why is 'Meguru' in Katakana?" "That's just how it is," Gaav declared firmly. Dolphin fell silent, overwhelmed.

In the end, the conversation hadn't progressed at all. Phibrizzo exhaled a tired sigh. "Honestly... for all that buildup, you've only confused everyone." He shook his head and held up a finger to change the subject. "Next, regarding the influence on the barrier caused by my disappearance—" "Wait a second. Before that, there's something I've been meaning to say for a while." Gaav spoke up again mid-sentence. "...Is there still something else, Gaav?" "Just listen. I think it's something that concerns all of you.

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[1] The famous badly drawn episode name.

It’s about the Black Magic in our world." "What is it?" Phibrizzo folded his arms irritably. Gaav nodded and continued. "In the first place, Black Magic basically works by borrowing the power of high-ranking Mazoku, doesn't it?" "Tell us something we don't know," Grausherra said suspiciously.

"Among those, of course, are spells derived from our power. And they're quite high-level spells even among Black Magic." "Of course. We are lieutenants of the Dark Lord. Things that use our power cannot be weak." "...No, that’s the thing. Because of those super-powerful spells, the subordinate Mazoku—valuable assets for destroying the world—are being wiped out left and right!" 『……Hah!!』

The four were struck with shock. But Phibrizzo quickly shook his head, put on a composed expression, and shrugged. "Wh-what are you talking about? We know that all too well. But the fact that they use spells borrowing our power means that humans worship us in their subconscious. For Mazoku, who are spiritual beings, that is a feast. Those foolish humans are giving us power without even knowing it." "Well, rather than worship... isn't it more like they think of you as a 'subcontractor'?" 『Ugh!』 The four Mazoku, starting with Phibrizzo, clutched their chests and groaned in pain. For Mazoku, mental damage is a lethal poison. Gaav’s words had gouged their hearts more than expected.

"D-don't mock subcontractors!" "That’s right! Japanese industry is supported by the superior technology of small local factories!" Zelas and Dolphin shouted as if convincing themselves. They were saying something a bit strange again, but they didn't seem to notice. Gaav spread his palms as if to pacify them. "Alright, alright. There’s a part of that which can't be helped. If Mazoku were to worry about humans and be stingy with their power, their very existence might disappear."

"But," Gaav’s gaze sharpened. "Beyond that—there’s one thing about spells that has always bothered me." "B-bothered you?" Phibrizzo asked, his breathing still ragged. Gaav nodded solemnly. "Yeah. —As I said before, there are spells in Black Magic that borrow our power." "So, that’s—" "Just listen. In my case—*Gaav Flare* (Demon Dragon's Raging Fire Roar)." Gaav looked at Zelas. She looked puzzled for a moment, but quickly caught his drift. "In my case... it is *Zelas Brid* (Beast Master's Fang Manipulating Bullet)." Next, Gaav looked at Dolphin and Grausherra. "...*Dolphin Zelas* (Sea Master's Eradicating Slash) and *Dolphin Blast* (Sea Master's Spear Rupture)." "*Dynast Brass* (Dynast Lightning Array) and *Dynast Breath* (Dynast Glacier Gale)."

Hearing everyone’s spell names, Gaav nodded grandly. "Right. They mostly contain your name or your title, don't they?" "What of it...?" Dolphin tilted her head. Then,

Gaav slowly turned his eyes toward Phibrizzo and spoke quietly. "*Ragna Blast* (Hellmaster's Descending Demon Array)." "……" Phibrizzo's shoulder twitched. "*Ragna Drive* (Hellmaster's Phantom Haze Curse)." "...W-what are you trying to say?" Phibrizzo's cheek twitched, and his voice trembled. Then, Gaav couldn't hold it back anymore and burst out laughing, clutching his stomach.

"Pff... pfpf, ah-hahahaha! What is 'Ragna'? What is 'Ragna'!? Eh? Is it cool? Is it supposed to be cool?" "S-shut up! Unlike yours, my name is hard to put into a spell name!" Phibrizzo screamed. "Is that right? Is that really it? Maybe 'Phibrizzo' is hard to fit, but wouldn't 'Hell Blast' or 'Hell Drive' have worked?" "Ugh... kuuuuh!" Phibrizzo groaned in frustration, his face turning red. But then, as if he'd realized something, his eyes widened and he shouted back at Gaav.

"T-that's right! In the first place, those aren't names *I* gave them! Humans made them up on their own to borrow my power!" "Oh? But you were the one who decided to lend your power to those finished spells, weren't you? Hehe, you actually like them a bit, don't you?" "That's not...!" "No, wait. Rather, humans would surely try to make the spells accurately to borrow the power, wouldn't they? Our spells are proof of that." "……!?" Phibrizzo choked. Conversely, Gaav wore a wicked grin. "Hey, Phibrizzo. Don't tell me you... you did it, didn't you?" Phibrizzo's body jolted. The chair he was sitting on started to rattle, and grease-sweat dripped down his face. "Done what?" "What did he do?" "What on earth—" Grausherra, Zelas, and Dolphin knit their brows. Gaav continued. "Hehe, isn't it obvious? This bastard disguised himself as a human and taught the 'cool spells I thought up' to human sorcerers!"

—*Gasp!*

As Gaav pointed a finger at Phibrizzo, Phibrizzo's body jumped as if hit by an attack spell. Mazoku are spiritual beings. Mental damage is... (and so on). The mistakes of one's own youth—the so-called "dark history" (cringeworthy past)—gouges the heart deeper than anything.

"G-gaaaaaaahhhhhhh!" "Ah, Hellmaster-dono!" "Your feet! Your feet are starting to disappear!" "I-it's okay! I think it sounds cool!" "Y-yes! *Ragna Blast* is cool!" "Indeed, I feel a sense of naming style." "A... ga... gaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!?" As the three tried to encourage him, Phibrizzo writhed in even more pain. "Ah, why!?" "We gave him the highest praise!" "Grausherra! Don't you dare praise his naming sense!" "Mmph... my apologies. But naming sense aside, I think *Ragna Blast* sounds cool." "Yes! Gaav is the strange one!" "Exactly! A half-man like him just can't understand!" "Then stop saying those kind words to meeeeeeeeee!" Phibrizzo thrashed his legs while covering his

ears. Sometimes, kind words can be a sharper blade than insults.

—A few minutes later. Having finally calmed his breathing, Phibrizzo regenerated his fading feet and sat up. "Y-you've... gone and done it... Gaav..." "Oh, you're alive. —Well, you're already dead, I guess. Impressive mental strength, 'Ragna Boy'." "Who are you calling 'Ragna Boy'!?" Phibrizzo roared, then took a deep breath to calm his heart before showing a fearless smile. "I wondered what you were thinking, appearing before us after betraying us once... I see, this was your goal. But too bad. Even if I'm dead, I'm the Hellmaster. My heart isn't soft enough to be taken down by something like this." "No, you were the one thrashing around on your own." Gaav knit his brows, but Phibrizzo wasn't listening. He continued with his fearless smile. "Besides... it was a mistake. To try to engage me in mental warfare." "Huh?" Gaav looked suspicious at Phibrizzo's ominous words. "Hehehe... did you really think I didn't know? Gaav! About *your* spectacular dark history!" "What...!?" Gaav's shoulder shook slightly. Phibrizzo looked at Gaav with satisfaction. "You'll regret defying this Hellmaster not once, but twice!" He swung his arms dramatically and pointed a finger at Gaav. "—Gaav! In the eyecatch of the final episode of *Slayers TRY*, you were wearing a schoolgirl uniform (sailor fuku)!!"

"Wh...!" "A-a schoolgirl uniform!?" "No way, *that* Gaav!?" Zelas, Dolphin, and Grausherra cried out in shock at Phibrizzo's revelation. However. "Oh." Gaav himself remained perfectly calm. "W-why aren't you flustered!? It's a schoolgirl uniform! An old man like you was even wearing the loose socks that were popular back then! Why aren't you embarrassed!?" "No, I mean..." As he spoke, Gaav unbuttoned the ivory-colored coat he was wearing from top to bottom. And when he'd finished, he threw the coat open with both hands. There was his muscular physique—wrapped in a skin-tight schoolgirl uniform. "I'm wearing it right now."

『W-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?』 The four Mazoku screamed at the shocking sight. Dolphin's feet started to disappear again. "Yeah, once I tried it on, it became a habit. Well? Does it suit me?" "D-don't wiggle your hips!" "Don't come over here! Don't come heeeeere!?" "What? How cold of you." Gaav pouted. "Anyway—was that your ace in the hole?" "Ugh..." "As expected, Hellmaster Phibrizzo-sama is on another level, isn't he?" "Don't call me Hellmaster and 'Ragna Master' at the same time!!" "Why not? You like it, don't you? Hehe... I think 'Ragna' is super cool. Is it from Ragnarok in Norse mythology? As expected, the leader of the lieutenants has a different sense than us. If it were me, I'd be too embarrassed... eh, hmm?"

Suddenly, Gaav stopped talking. The reason was simple. Suddenly, a rumbling sound like an earthquake began, and the ground they were standing on started to be drawn

somewhere like a receding tide. "Wh-what is this...!?" "The ground is like a wave!?" As the lieutenants were startled by the sudden event, Phibrizzo's eyes widened in horror as he realized something.

"N-no way..." "What is it? Do you know something, Phibrizzo?" "R... run..." "What?" "Oh no, we talked too loud! Run, quickly! At this rate—"

F: Something irreversible will... gah!? **G:** Hey, Phibrizzo! What is this place! It feels different from before! **Z:** The... the narration... it's disappearing!? **D:** W-what is this? This 'D' thing! (Dialogue tag) **G:** Could it be... it's showing our names? **G:** Hey, Grausherra. You're overlapping with me. **F:** That doesn't matter! This place... it's bad! Run, quickly—

?: *—Heh, heh, heh—*

F: A... a... aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! **G:** !? W-what is it!? That voice! **D:** I-is someone there!?

?: *—What's wrong with 'Ragna' in a spell—*

G: Huh...? What about Ragna? That's Phibrizzo's... **F:** No! Haven't you realized yet!? **G:** Realized what? **F:** You felt it once yourself at the Dragon's Peak! Lina Inverse's strike! The spell that borrowed *that person's* power! **G:** Ah? That's... ...!! No way— **F:** Yes! The spell of absolute destruction that cut off the Demon Dragon King's arm despite being from a human! The void blade that cleaves all things! Its name is...! **G:** ...*Ragna*... *Blade*... (God-Slaying Slash).

?: **—WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT!!?—**

F: Waaaaaaaah!? **G:** Th-this time the ground is like a vortex!? **D:** Kyaaaaaaaaaah! **G:** W-we're being sucked in!? **Z:** Why us toooooo!?

Hellmaster Phibrizzo's "World-Destruction" Meeting: The End

Lina Inverse’s Record
(The Reality Check)
by Hajime Kanzaka

"As if!" With all my pent-up energy, I slammed the parchment onto the table. Several sheets fluttered to the floor.

"Ah!? What are you doing, Lina!?" Amelia scrambled to pick them up. I glared at her. "What is this!?" "What do you mean? It’s..." Amelia clutched the sheets to her chest and puffed out her own. "It’s a record of our journey!" "It’s a fabrication!" "It’s *mostly* factual!"

We stared each other down across the table in a small inn on the way to Dils. After dinner, Amelia had brought this stack of parchment. I’d read the first few lines while sipping juice, but I couldn't take it anymore.

"Lina's shouting... what does it say? Can I read?" Gourry, sitting to my right and snacking on nuts, looked curious. Amelia’s eyes sparkled. "Of course! Please, tell me your thoughts!" She handed them over, adding, "But wipe your fingers first! I don't want oil on the parchment!"

While Gourry read, Zelgadis sat across from me, silent. He had his hood pulled low to avoid stares, but his eyes were moving. He was interested.

Xellos wasn't there—he was off doing who-knows-what. Thank goodness. If he saw how he was described ("mostly black and useless"), I’d probably die of a stress-induced ulcer.

"Records are necessary!" Amelia insisted. "We are in the middle of a massive Mazoku conspiracy!" "Are we?" I asked. "Yes! I have no proof, but with everything happening,

it’s stranger to think there *isn't* one!"

She was right. I knew from Xellos that there *was* a conspiracy, though I didn't know the details. But this record...

"Lina, you're mentioned as 'screaming' here... 'With a voice like a cat's'?" Gourry asked. "Amelia," I sighed. "I'm not saying don't record things. But the personalities are all wrong. Why am I and Zelgadis suddenly full of 'justice'?"

"Justice?" Zelgadis reacted. "Me?" "Yeah," I said. "You're apparently shouting 'In the name of justice!'." "...What is written in there..." Zelgadis took a few pages from Gourry.

"And Gourry calling me 'Kitten'? I don't remember that!" "Gourry-san said it! I heard it!" Amelia cried. "That was because there was an *actual* kitten on the road while we were fighting! He said 'Ah, a kitten,' and I hit him with a slipper for looking away!" "I omitted that part for brevity!" "Why!?"

Amelia stood on the table. "If something happens to us, the world needs to know! This is for the next generation!" "Get off the table," I said. "You look like a drunk." She climbed down, dejected. "Anyway, the facts are right! We were attacked and we won!" "That’s the *only* part that’s right!"

"I put a disclaimer at the top!" Amelia argued. "And I wrote it in the first person as Lina so it’s more relatable!" "Relatable? Why not write it as yourself?" "I tried," Amelia admitted. "But it sounded so fake even I was surprised. 'The princess of Seirune, lover of justice, meets a super-mage and a super-swordsman and saves the world.' It felt like I was laying it on too thick. And if I wrote it as me, the word 'justice' would appear ten times as often!"

I could see her point. But still. "If people read this, they'll think *I* wrote it. They'll think I’m some justice-loving maiden!" "I had to embellish it!" Amelia said. "If I wrote your actual personality, people would be horrified! You're violent and aggressive!" "I am *not* 'horrified' material!"

Then Amelia got serious. "Who is the 'real' Lina? I used to wonder that about myself—the princess, the girl, the public figure. My sister Gracia told me: they're all the 'real' you. The you your father sees, the you your sister sees. They're all different, but all real. So the 'Lina' I see is just as real as the one you see."

"Fine," I said. "But *this* Lina," I pointed at the parchment, "doesn't exist."

"Embellishment is one thing," Zelgadis interrupted. "But as a record, this is useless. For example, during that battle, a Mazoku's attack grazed Lina's cheek. Here, you wrote: 'My head was half-torn off, but I'm okay, no problem! ♪' No one will believe this."

"That was for dramatic effect!" Amelia squeaked. "And later it says, 'My head grew back through the power of love and justice'," Zelgadis continued flatly. "What kind of monster is that?"

Zelgadis went on a long critique about character arcs and descriptions. By the time he finished, the other customers had left. "Thank you!" Amelia said. "So, specifically, what should I do?" Zelgadis slumped onto the table. "I... I just told you several specific things..." "I didn't understand any of it!" Amelia said proudly. "Just... rewrite it," Gourry said with a bright smile. "Everyone makes mistakes. Don't worry about it!"

Amelia slumped next to Zelgadis. "Even Gourry-san thinks it's a mistake..." The "mostly black and useless" record was defeated.

Lina Inverse's Record (The Reality Check): The End

Afterword

Writer: Hajime Kanzaka + L

L: I'M BAAAAACK!
Writer: Wait, wait. This is an anniversary book with many authors. Don't start self-promoting immediately.
L: You don't get it! Everyone's waiting for me! Do you think people want a gloomy author mumbling thanks for 25 years?
Writer: 25 years... that's longer than the original age setting for Kycilia Zabi in *Gundam*. **L:** She was that young!? With that look!?
Writer: Anyway, it's thanks to everyone that I've been able to keep writing this long.
L: Thanks to me, you mean! I'm the main body! As long as the afterword survives, the story can be regenerated!
Writer: That's what villains say right before they're defeated!
L: It's fine! As long as there is darkness in the hearts of men, *Slayers* will return!
Writer: Why are you taking the villain's position!? Anyway, I hope to see everyone again soon.
L: Stay healthy, everyone! ♪